DESTIVERSE CHAPTERS 21 TO 34

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Book web https://destiverse.wordpress.com/

Lobsterhero youtube www.youtube.com/channel/UCU5wlGLD7BLppqXqX785dIw/videos

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Verse #21: Change the Story

Verse #22: Two Sides of a Soul

Verse #23: The End of Beginning

BOOK II: DRYING INK

Verse #24: Fresh Winds

Verse #25: Between the Two of Us

Verse #26: What I Lack

Verse #27 Flashes from My Past: Dream Yet Unrealized

Verse #28: Joint Effort

Verse #29: Best Way to Train

Verse #30: Serendipity

Verse #31: Magna Crux

Verse #32: Sweet Whites Café & Bakery

Verse #33: Bee Happy

Verse #34: Adventurers' Gathering

VERSE #21: CHANGE THE STORY

The snowstorm whirling through the streets of Powderberg showed no signs of easing up.

Miste felt like she was walking at the bottom of a raving river as the streams of ice blasted her. She had to cover her face fully with the collar of her jacket, as well as keep her head tilted towards the snow-covered street; otherwise the sensation of being underwater would drown her.

After getting separated from Zeriah, Miste hadn't stopped running. She had made her way through the building, down the maintenance corridor, and across the tunnel that connected the building to the alaxdrite mines at the edge of the city. All this while taking the very speediest of steps.

Even now, as Miste pushed against the snowstorm, she gave it her all. Still, her progress was pitifully slow, and she kept stumbling to the street constantly. However, that didn't change the fact that even in the face of an overwhelming force, Miste refused to give up.

This was the best she could do.

Zeriah had implored Miste to get herself to safety, even though that was the last thing she wanted. She would've rather stayed behind with her friends and helped them. But then again, Miste also felt that since she had caused everyone so much worry, especially for Zeriah, she had no right to start acting difficult and throw away the caring given to her.

Thus here she was – safe. Cold and tired – but safe.

It was her own fault, really, she could've just stayed back at the mines, cowering from the blizzard. And yet, she opted to slog

through the streets of Powderberg instead. She was returning to the headquarters of Muspell Industries. Even if it was of no help to anyone, and even if it was simply for her own sake, Miste wanted to be as close to everyone as she could. Maybe, if she braved the storm and arrived to show her support to the rest of the gang, in spirit at least, her wishes for their safe return would reach them.

An imposing staircase emerged into Miste's view amidst the storming snow. She had almost reached her goal.

Atop the flight of steps stood Muspell Industries. The skyscraper's highest floors were engulfed by the blizzard. After merely glimpsing skyward, Miste's face got utterly clogged by the snow. Each of the flakes were like icy needles stabbing her cheeks. She dropped to stare back at the street and swiped her face clean.

Miste hauled herself under one of the oak trees that grew across the boulevard alongside the building. The canopy gave her a moderate cover from the storm. The trees themselves were full of healthy-green leaves, but with a pure-white frosting on top of them – a rather surreal sight.

A gust of slithering wind burrowed inside Miste's jacket, slicing her back with an invisible blade. She almost keeled over from the abrupt freezing lick.

Brr…!! The things that I would give for a treehouse, a heater unit, and a cozy hammock right about now…

A moment passed by as Miste merely stood still at the mercy of the storm, shivering.

Tsk, I'm glad I decided to add that thick lining inside the gauntlet, otherwise my arm would be turning into a popsicle!

Miste ruffled her legs and embraced her body tightly to try keep warm. No such luck. No matter how much she struggled against it, the frost always found her.

Suddenly, Miste's hand nudged against something hard inside the pocket of her jacket; the radio that Zeriah had given to her earlier. She had completely forgotten about it!

Miste brought out the radio. Her eyes drifted between the device and the skyscraper looming in front of her.

Maybe I should call the others, tell them to be careful and come back safe… nah, they might be busy… they probably are… I shouldn't…

Suddenly, a crackling static erupted from the radio, followed by a familiar voice.

"You there, Big-Z?"

"Gaah!!!"

Miste's startled scream echoed far into the distance, carried by the storming winds. She nearly dropped the radio in her surprise, clutching it back inside her grip in a fit of panic.

"Dani?!"

"He-hey, Mystic-M! Good to hear your voice! Man, we were majorly worried about you. I'm glad to know you're A-OK. Are you with Big-Z?"

"No, I… Zeri told me to get out and stayed behind by himself. I'm actually outside the building right now."

There was a noticeable pause before Dani's voice returned.

"That's good to hear… very good… In fact, it's great–"

"Dani! Get to the point!"

A strange woman with Dani cut him short.

“Who was that?”

“Oh, yeah, that was Ejrica – Ejrica Nekaro. She turned out to be that hooded mystery person from earlier. She’s helping me out. She’s been great, I’m sure you’ll like her too. Y’know, I can’t wait till we all get to just sit down together again, maybe over some nice hot food and–”

“Dani!! Focus!”

The woman, Ejrica, sounded extremely flustered. Moreover, Dani’s voice was lacking its usual energy. A somber note underlined his delivery.

“What’s wrong, Dani?”

“Uh, yeah, about that… we have a bit of a problem. Heh, you know how it is with us Adventurers by this point, right? You see, Ejrica and I went out exploring the laboratories, looking for trouble, and man, did we ever find some…”

“Dani… you’re scaring me.”

“There’s a bomb here. Like a *really* plus-sized one… I reckon it’ll be making a healthy-big boom once it detonates, like *taking-out-the-entire-building-in-its-wake* kind of boom.”

Miste swallowed her gasp, nearly choking on it. She felt like a major idiot! How did everyone just forget about such a crucial detail in the hooded guy’s – Roger’s – MO?

“How much ti–”

“It’ll go off in less than two minutes. Soooo… Mystic-M… you wouldn’t happen to be proficient in disarming explosives, would you?”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“Alrighty, no problem… let’s take a looksee…”

A heavy clatter of metal crashed from Miste’s radio, quickly followed by Ejrica’s voice.

“Don’t just go kicking it like that, you idiot!!”

“Sorry. Hmm… lessee, lessee… so, I took care of the front panel or some such… now there’s like a hundred different colored wires all clumped together here… I’m supposed to cut these and the bomb will dud out, right?”

“No, wait Dani! I believe some of those wires could be traps! One of them is the real fuse, the others are most likely backups that will actually detonate the bomb if cut.”

“Huh, that so? Hehe… Thanks Mystic-M, it sounds like you’re pretty proficient in this stuff after all.”

“Please, don’t make jokes now.”

“I’m Sorry. So, it’s basically going to be a guessing game at this point. Any suggestions, Ejrica, a favorite color perhaps?”

“I trust your judgement.”

Miste heard through the radio how Dani drew an arrow from his quiver with a pronounced rasp.

“Alright, here goes.”

“Wait! You can still get out, why risk it?”

“It’s true that Ejrica and I could probably make it – if we really dash it – but there are also quite a few folks around here with their lights currently out. I don’t think they’ll be as lucky. And it’s not like I’m about to just abandon Big-Z, Sam-Yam and Rei-Rei either.”

“Dani…”

A hard lump formed inside Miste’s throat.

Once again, I fail to help my friends when they need me the most…

“Hey, Mystic-M?”

The warmth in Dani’s voice when he called for Miste forced a waterfall of tears to burst out from her eyes. Dani was smiling, Miste could tell.

“Just in case this turns out bad–”

“No! Don’t say it!”

“I just want you to know that… I’m glad I got to meet you guys… I have no regrets.”

“No! Dani, please don’t! I don’t want to hear it!”

“I’m happy that I got to be your friend.”

“No!!!”

Miste dropped on her knees. Her pain-stricken cry howled into the emptiness of the city; the icy winds carried her sorrow to echo afar, yet to the ears of none but the girl herself.

She let her radio fall, and the device buried itself deep within the snow.

Miste kept wiping her face dry, yet the rivers of ice on her cheeks didn’t stop flowing.

Why… why… it’s not fair… why must I be so useless…

A tendril of frost slithered around Miste’s heart and proceeded to squeeze it, making her resolve gush and flow to waste like juices from an over-ripe apple.

I'm useless… I'm so scared… I can't help anyone… Someone… Please… Help…

The freeze spread to lick her insides, sending shivers throughout her entire body. Unlike the blizzard surrounding her, this cold was something she couldn't take shelter from.

Miste fell to a slump, staring down at the snow-covered street. Her tears froze over her cheeks, pricking her skin with the sensation of burning and freezing at the same time.

Zeri… I'm sorry…

Miste's thoughts slipped from her grasp.

Akrelion… summer… home… the mines… Coal… Sasha… Cozo… Zeri… I had a perfectly good life, everything I could ever hope for… why did I choose to leave it all… I'm selfish… for a naïve dream… for the life of an Adventurer… If I had chosen different, I wouldn't have to suffer… It's my own fault… so cold… so cold… so cold…

Miste allowed the frost that covered her from the inside and out to embrace her freely. She didn't care what happened to her. If her friends were to disappear from her life, then her world might as well be nothing but everlasting winter.

I'd rather freeze that blasted bomb if I could… I… I… I could… couldn't I?

A realization hit Miste blunt on the head. She began sweeping the snow in front of her in a panic, trying to find the radio.

As Miste finally caught hold of the radio she bellowed into the speaker:

"Dani!! Wait!! I have an idea!"

“Yeeouuch! Ugh… that’s alright… I can manage with one ear… *An idea* you say? Let’s hear it.”

“You said you were at the laboratories, right? Look for a canister that has LN2 printed on it.”

A rush of two people scattering about sounded from the radio. A moment later, Dani’s voice returned.

“Found one!”

“Great! Now, there should be a pair of protective gloves there too, put them on. That’s *liquid nitrogen*, it’s a substance with the boiling point of −195.79 °C, meaning that in its liquid state its beyond freezing, so be careful. Dump the whole thing over the fuse of the bomb, it’ll freeze the thing.”

“Okay, I’ll do just that.”

There was a rattle of heavy metal, a massive slosh, and a crunchy swoosh.

“…I think that did it.”

“Now smash it!”

“Will do.”

The radio blared with a sound reminiscent of a tea set being shattered. The noise was followed by two sighs of relief forming together.

“So, it’s harmless now?”

“It should be.”

“Wow, Mystic-M, how did you know something like that?”

“I… I’ve just… all my life… I’ve spent reading… it just suddenly came to me… I’m so glad I could…”

Miste had to swallow her tears all the while she spoke, though they were now tears of joy.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, all of you! I was so scared!”

“Hey, hey, come on, it’s alright now. You saved us. No need for tears.”

“Hihihi, *sniffle*, hihih, right! Now, just get yourselves out of there safely and we’ll discuss that sitting-down-and-eating -thing.”

“Heh, sounds good to me! See ya soon, Mystic-M.”

The radio went silent.

To think I almost gave up, and right at the crucial moment too… Nothing is over until it’s really over… I guess that… True destiny awaits those brave enough to take the first step…

The storming snowfall eased up just a bit – still whipping and freezing, yet noticeably less so.

Miste hugged herself while taking a deep breath.

Brrr… It’s still cold as sin out here!

While Miste let the air slowly escape her lungs, a sudden deafening crash coming from above made her jump. An explosion, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Miste looked up, fearing for a moment that after all their efforts the bomb had still gone off. Luckily, she was mistaken. Instead, the sound came from the third floor of the building. A window had burst into pieces.

Amongst all the glass falling towards the street, there was a person. The thick whirling of snow made it hard to tell exactly who. The person flew through the air like shot from a catapult

and crashed down on the opposite side of the street, lifting up a cloud of snow to veil them.

As the snow settled, the person was revealed to be Reiram.

Miste dashed for the elder Adventurer who laid down on the ground perfectly motionless and deadly silent.

“Reiram! What happened!?”

Freyja’s projection appeared next to Reiram. The lady astra turned to face the approaching girl.

“Stay away, Miste!!”

Miste screeched to a halt, slipping along the loose snow and nearly fell on her behind.

Freyja’s usual spirited warmth had switched for panicky dread as she shooed Miste to keep her distance.

“Run!! Get as far away from here as you can!!”

“…I don’t understand, why–!?”

The wind shifted direction. Abrupt and unnatural, it looked like two opposing winds clashed from either end of the street. The currents of air twirled together and flowed upward, towards the destroyed window of Muspell Industries. At the same time, the fall of snow flipped upside down, sucked towards the concentration of air.

A man was standing on the windowsill. He dropped down from the ledge nonchalantly and landed on an invisible pedestal created by the flow of air. The winds had come together as a clear-white serpent, one which this snake charmer had full control over. The concentration of air lowered smoothly towards the ground, carrying the man down with it.

As the man reached street level, Miste recognized him.

Clint Kazer.

After landing in front of the building's mighty staircase, Clint began pacing towards Reiram.

The moment that the tamed winds ceased to be of use to Clint, the laws of nature returned in effect and the street was once again at the mercy of the snowstorm. Via his showcase of unexplainable abilities, Miste was convinced that Clint was in fact an Astral Bearer.

Even though he was only wearing his light tuxedo, whipping and weaving along the whims of the wind, Clint seemed unfazed by the blizzard. Moreover, the freezing weather seemed to complement his own icy stare, thin smile, and the self-satisfied air permeating him – it fit him like a glove.

Clint didn't even glance at Miste while he walked past the girl and towards Reiram.

As Clint drew closer, Reiram tried getting up, but managed only pitiful twitching in place. The damage from his fall was far from healing yet.

Seeing Reiram struggle seemed to amuse Clint.

"You are a tenacious bastard, I give you that!"

Clint stopped over the beaten Adventurer, glaring down on him.

"If all of you trash from Hex Nova were able to take this much punishment, who knows, I might actually hold some respect for your guild."

Reiram's edge-rifle laid next to him. Clint picked up the weapon while throwing Freyja a glance of contempt.

“Tch, Astral Bearer… all that potential within him, and yet he clings on to a society of misguided fools. Adventurers… such an insignificant life to lead. What wasteful beings, the both of you.”

Freyja remained silent, simply matching the disgusting man’s gaze.

Miste on the other hand was not about to settle on something that easy.

In a singular moment, the truth of things had revealed itself to Miste. Zeriah had been absolutely right. Clint must’ve been part of this all along, he had to be! It only made sense, all of Roger’s actions thus far had played into Clint’s pocket. Most likely, no, definitely, Clint was the true mastermind behind everything.

Reiram must’ve cornered Clint, and knowing about the bomb, Clint had made a desperate move to get out of the building. Not all the details were yet clear to Miste, but frankly, they didn’t matter at the moment. Clint was a villain, he made it all too clear. Once again, Miste felt like an idiot for not grasping simple truths dangling right in front of her.

Miste began marching towards Clint.

“Hey! Don’t just pretend like I don’t exist!”

Ignoring the girl’s bellowing, Clint thrust the blade of Reiram’s edge-rifle through the Adventurer’s chest. The crunch of the weapon piercing Reiram’s skin made Miste queasy.

“Stop it!!”

Clint pulled the trigger repeatedly, emptying the rifle inside its owner. Three slicing echoes split the air, followed by a moment of hollow clicking as Clint kept pulling on the trigger. He left the rifle to jut out from Reiram’s chest while the snow around the

Adventurer kept shifting in color, from pure white to deep crimson.

Miste gritted her teeth together, a spout of hate bubbling within her. She knew full well that this wouldn't be enough to finish off Reiram, after all, she had seen him go through worse. Despite that, this was her friend being hurt – like hell she'd let it slide.

"You MONSTER!!"

Freyja kept waving the girl away.

"Please Miste, it's not worth it! Just run!!"

Clint turned around, and as if slapping Miste with all he got, still refused to acknowledge her presence with even a glance. Instead, the man shifted his focus on the skyscraper in front of him.

"Grr! Look at me, you insufferable prick!!"

Miste's foaming got lost in the howling of the wind.

Clint brought out his fancy pocket watch and stared at it, confused. The tiny nudge of uncertainty on Clint's face made Miste grin gleefully. The man didn't know about the bomb being disarmed.

Miste channeled all the smugness she could muster into her delivery.

"What's the matter? Waiting for something? Sorry to tell you, but we already took care of your toy."

Despite Miste's constant provoking, Clint held on to his superior demeanor. He turned to walk down the boulevard, away from the girl.

"Oh, no you do not!"

Miste caught a fistful of snow and chucked a loosely-made snowball at Clint's neck.

"You aren't going anywhere, I won't let you!"

"…*Miste*, was it?"

The way those words crawled their way out of Clint's mouth sent a shiver down Miste's spine, harsher than any slice of wind ever could. The girl was near to fall over as her knees started to wobble all of a sudden.

Clint turned slowly around to face Miste.

"Congratulations! You just reached the limit of my good will. I do not usually like hurting things that are not directly in my way, but seeing as you insist on confronting me, who am I to deny you the privilege of getting killed by me."

Freyja shouted for Miste with heartbreaking plea in her voice.

"Go!! Run!! Do not do this! He's too strong for you!"

"Sorry Freyja, but I'm not gonna let him get away with this. I'm not afraid of him!"

Clint's icy stare needled at Miste through the veil of shifting snow. His thin smile stretched wide, showing the tiniest bit of teeth, a demented grin.

"…You really do not know your place."

A pair of jet-black wings sprouted from behind Clint, reaching out several meters on either side. The wings curved to arc in front of him, like the arms of a lover jumping on the back of their dearest. A powerful talon reached from behind Clint's neck to grab on to his face, creating a peculiar cage-like mask. Another talon emerged from behind him, grabbing hold of his

waist. Finally, a long and mighty beak curved over his head to point forward.

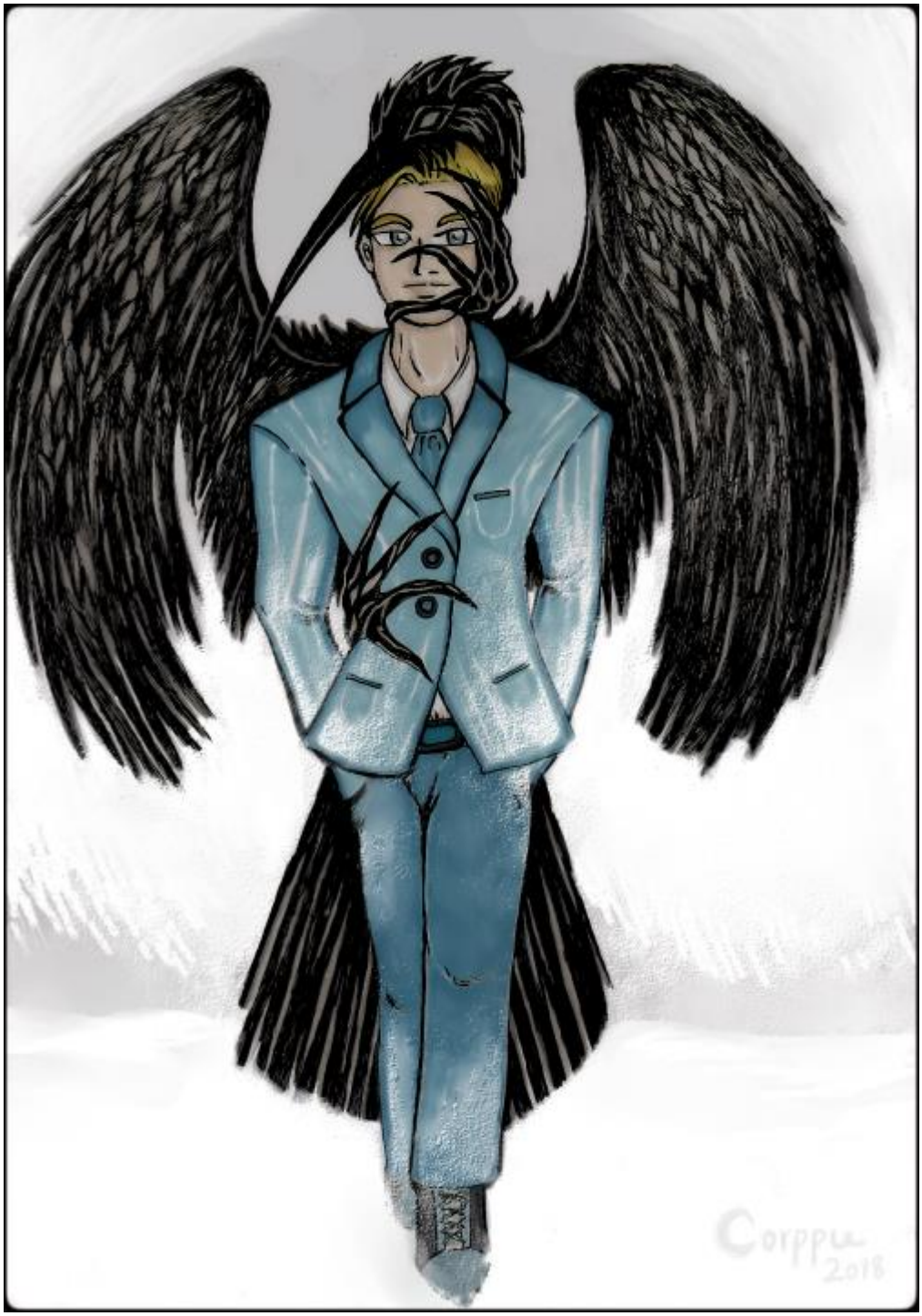
The creature that had emerged from nothingness spoke out, its voice echoing like wind blowing through a tunnel.

“Clint, this does not further our goals. The plan has fallen to shambles, we should be moving on.”

“Do not fret, Shu, we’ll be on our way soon enough. I’ll just kill the brat first. I’m craving for some release.”

Clint’s astra – appointed as *Shu* – sighed out its answer.

“Very well…”



A blast of wind breathed towards Miste from behind Clint. The girl was blown on her back by the sudden gale.

“Gaah!!”

“Tsk, tsk, now then, how exactly were you planning to stop me?”

Miste climbed back on her feet. She tensed her whole body to fight the blizzard whirling around her, along her own raging emotions, which made her tremble.

She reached out to Yggdrazil's power. The familiar flicker from the astra trapped inside the alaxdrite greeted her. Miste brought her right hand forward and created the shape of an enormous fist with the energy pouring from the alaxdrite. Learning more about her astral ability had made her slightly more confident using it. She now knew that the energy wasn't emitting from the alaxdrite itself, but actually *channeled* through the gem, and the astra within. The energy needed was generated by Miste's own life force.

"My plan is actually quite simple, I'm gonna beat you senseless until you scream uncle!"

"Ah, it seems we have a day of surprises on our hands. I didn't take you for an Astral Bearer as well. Can't fathom what kind of a scrawny astra would lend their powers to some petite little girl like you though."

"Shut up!!"

Miste's emotions were closing the point of boiling over. She took a defiant step towards Clint.

"You show nothing but contempt for everybody around you! Everyone is just a tool to you, like you're so much better than everyone else! What the hell gives you the authority to determine the worth of others, to take life as you please?!"

Miste had never felt so much hate towards anyone in her entire life.

“You’ve hurt my friends! Your actions have led to the suffering of countless people! It’s your fault that Albert will have to grow up without his dad, and I will never, ever, forgive you for that!”



Clint stared at the girl as she ranted on, unfazed by her words.

“Are you quite done?”

The black wings cradling Clint spread out wide, slicing the air around him. He thrust his right hand to point at the girl before him. A torrent of winds gathered at the tip of his index finger, compressing tightly into a singular sphere. As more and more air from all around kept accumulating in front of Clint, the pull of wind behind Miste nearly sent her falling face down to the street.

From behind the talon that covered his face, Clint flashed a lustful grin with demonic glee.

“Disappear!”

The sphere of air shot towards Miste.

The girl leapt aside on instinct, just barely dodging the bubble of air.

As the bubble passed by her, the compressed air suddenly expanded rapidly, creating a flameless explosion. The wall of air slammed against Miste, shattering the energy construct she had created and sent her flying through the street.

Miste fell down with a tumble and ended up smack on her face.

Her scream of pain got stuck in her throat, she managed to deliver only a pitiful wheezing cough. Her body ached all over, her head was heavy, and all she could see was hazy white.

Miste did her best to stand up, while Clint’s laughter resounded from afar with a mocking tone.

As soon as Miste managed to pull herself straight, another bullet of air closed in and detonated right next to her, sending her flying once more.

Miste landed on her back. The bed of snow covering the street did little to soften the blow as her lungs got punched dry. Amidst the howling of wind and her own gasps for air, Miste could hear the voice of Freyja calling for her from the distance.

“Miste!! No!!”

A gush of warm blood slithered down Miste’s brow. Her right eye burned as drop after drop painted over the purple with the color of crimson.

I think I messed up… quite bad actually… have to… get up…

A slicing sound zooming past the winds alerted Miste to another one of Clint’s air bullets closing in. She scrambled up in a fit of panic and leapt away from the general direction where Clint was; all her senses were rendered hazy, and as such, Miste was unsure where she was heading.

The explosion of air went off behind her, giving her a nudge forward. Just as she was about to regain her bearings, another air bullet came careening straight for her. The blast of air smacked the girl to tumble backwards.

“Ha-ha-ha! How exactly are you planning to beat me if you spend all your time banging your head against the street!?”

Yet another air bullet detonated next to Miste, sending her flying across the street and against one of the trees decorating the sidelines of this one-sided battlefield.

Miste’s right rib suffered the blunt of the impact. An explosion of pain stung her, like a fistful of broken glass was shifting beneath her skin.

“Aaargh!! …It… hurts…”

“Ha-ha-ha! Where’s that spunk of yours from earlier? Have you finally come to understand your inadequacy?”

Miste fought back with all she had, trying to lift herself to stand despite the agony that was quickly sapping away at her will. A gush of blood filled her throat, nearly choking her. As she kept coughing out her own life essence, a horrifying realization pierced her soul.

I’m going to die here… I really am… it… it hurts…

The world around Miste blurred out, lost beyond the snowstorm that hungrily devoured her. She heard a distant echo of Freyja’s screaming, desperately calling for the girl to stand up – and the boisterous laughter of Clint.

“Ha-ha-ha! Out of steam, are we? In that case, I’ll be on my way. This has been quite enjoyable, I would say let’s do this again, but… y’know, *dying* and all. I guess I’ll stop by the inn while I still got some time to kill, and visit Roger’s lovely wife and child…”

Clint turned to walk away.

Miste reached out with her right hand, clawing her way forward with what little resolve she still had. Each of Miste’s heartbeats grew more distant from the last.

No… no… I don’t want it to end like this…

The torturous pain within Miste made her lose control of her limbs.

…but it hurts so much… I have to… give up…

Slowly, Miste’s eyes slumped shut.

“MISTEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

A voice thundered above all else, mightier than any storm in existence. It tugged on Miste's soul, commanding her to snap back to here and now.

Miste's eyes popped wide open. She turned to gaze towards the sound; up the building, at the destroyed window.

Zeriah was shouting from the top of his lungs. His words boomed out earnest – clear and sharp like steel.

"Get up!! You are stronger than this, I know you are!! You have to get up!! Remember what you promised!! You promised we would become Adventurers together!! If you break that promise… I'll never forgive you!! Do you hear meeeeee!!!"

The blaze in Zeriah's voice would have been enough to melt down any kind of frost. Miste's heart began skipping merrily, regaining its vigor; whenever Zeriah was near her she couldn't help it.

A swirling twinkle of azure from the alaxdrite on the back of Miste's hand lifted a smile on her lips.

I'm sorry I made both of you worry, Zeri, Yggdrazil… You're both right, I can't give up!

Miste felt like she'd been whacked repeatedly by a sledgehammer. Showing her defiance in the face of crippling pain, she slammed her palms on the ground and lifted herself on her knees.

A slicing sensation on her rib made Miste wince in revolt.

No… I will not give in…!

Miste took support against the tree and got on her feet.

"Thihihi…"

It's funny how I end up learning the same lesson over and over again. If it hurts, it means I'm still alive. If I'm still alive, it means I have a chance to fight back. If I have a chance to fight back, then… there's no way I'll ever let the people who believe in me down!

"…hehehehe…"

Miste wiped her right eye clean of blood. She must've looked like hell.

"…hahahaha… it's not like this is the first time I've bled… and I have a funny feeling it won't be the last…"

Miste's sniggering grew in volume as she marched towards the man in the distance.

"Hey! We're not done here!"

Clint shuddered upon hearing the girl's voice.

"Won't you just die already!"

He turned around and launched an air bullet towards Miste. The girl rolled out of the bullet's way. The blast of air shattered the tree behind her in half.

"Tch, so you had some fight left in you after all."

"Oh, I have much, *much* more than that."

Miste tapped into Yggdrazil's power, letting the energy within her run freely.

A blast of light engulfed the street inside blue brilliance.

Streams of energy shot outward from Miste's alaxdrite, coiling and lashing outward, mimicking the way the girl's hair whipped as she stood firm and defiant in the eye of the blizzard.

“Hey, hey, what’s this all of a sud–”

The output of energy pulsated to form a wall of air that blasted around Miste. Clint went tumbling on his back by the sudden force punching him.

As Clint climbed up, Miste could feel the aura around the man shifting.

“D–Do not screw with me, girl!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m done screwing around.”

Miste took a poised step towards Clint. The man’s face cringed visibly.

“You, Clint Kazer, represent everything I despise. You stand in the way of other people’s dreams, showing no trust nor respect to anyone but yourself. I hate to admit it, but there was a time long ago when I was quite similar to you. But I got to meet some wonderful people, and they showed me that I didn’t need all that hate, that I didn’t have to be bitter.”

With each of her words, punctuated by her confident stride forth, the azure energy flowing from within Miste bubbled out wildly, like boiling water from a geyser.

“I live my dream right here and now, together with my friends. They give me strength, they inspire me, their love is enough to keep me going. That’s the kind of world I believe in, and that’s the kind of world I want to protect. I’m going to become an Adventurer, the kind of Adventurer who will help other people realize their dreams as well!!”

“Whoa–wha–this is impossible… that kind of power…”

Miste thrust her right hand forth, gazing at the brilliance that gleamed at the back of her hand.

“I actually do not know much about my partner, we’ve only really talked once. But the one thing I do know is that he cares for the people around him above all else, and frankly… that’s enough for me.”

The azure gleam inside the alaxdrite twirled merrily, and Miste knew Yggdrazil would always be there to have her back.

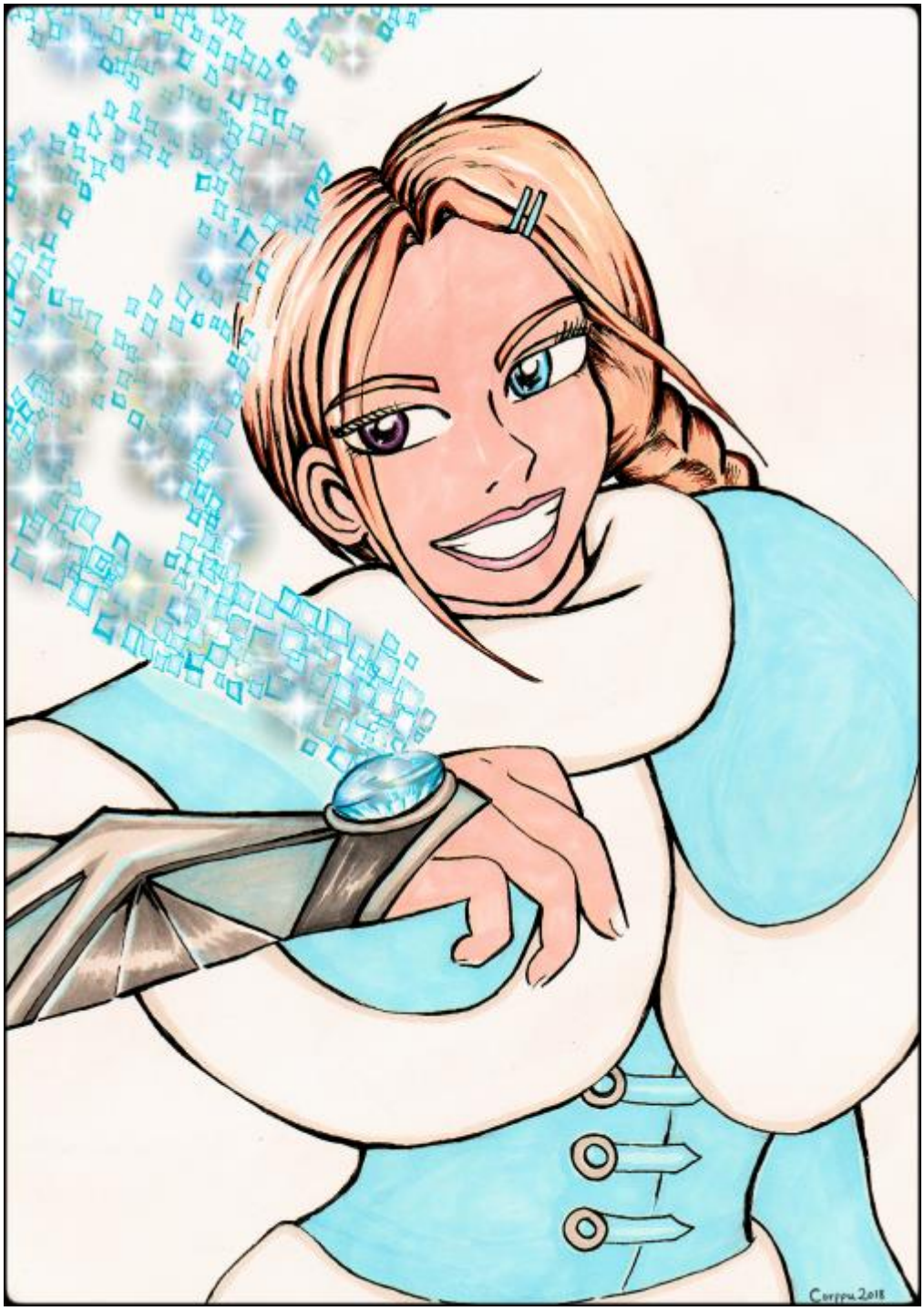
Miste took a powerful stance, gathering up all her emotions – all her love, her hate, her fear, her courage, her wishes, and the wishes of those close to her – and let it pour into the flow of energy.

“This is for you, Yggdrazil! I’ll show you that you made the right choice trusting me! I’ll show the whole world!”

Clint growled in shaken fury, gathering the wind around him for another air bullet.

Miste did not waver, she stood tall, she had made the decision to keep going on – for as long as there would be need for courage.

“…Yggdrazil, let’s destroy him!!”



VERSE #22: TWO SIDES OF A SOUL

Miste leapt to the side and out of the way of Clint's air bullet. The attack flew right past her and detonated harmlessly further down the street.

Alright, it's time to make good on all those lofty speeches and crush him!

In theory, Miste's goal was simple. She only needed to get close enough for her to give Clint one good whack with Yggdrazil's power and then the fight would be over in an instant.

…Most things in life are indeed simpler in theory.

There were several dozen meters between Miste and Clint. Normally it'd take no more than a few seconds from the girl to sprint the distance. However, given her opponent's ability to create exploding bullets out of compressed air, a direct assault would be doomed from the start. On top of that, regrettably enough, Miste could feel how the pool of energy within her was already drying out. She'd have to finish this fight as quickly as possible.

Miste did her best to block all excess thoughts from her mind, sharpening her attention to the moment and her opponent. Judging from what Yggdrazil had told her, and by her own experiments, the key to control Yggdrazil's power effectively was mental concentration.

For the time being, the only energy constructs Miste had been able to create were an enormous fist, and an indistinct flutter of energy. Not much to help her avoid attacks completely or get closer to her opponent.

Come on, Miste – use that brain you've been given!

Miste's attempts to push all but the essential from her mind ended up having the opposite effect; a flood of memories and faces of all the people she held dear bubbled from her soul.

This ain't gonna work! I'm not able to just suddenly go all resolute!

Clint collected another gust of wind at his fingertips and aimed for Miste.

…Yelp, gotta move!

In that moment, a tricky plan simmered to the surface from Miste's boiling kettle of thoughts.

Miste took a dashing step to the left and stretched her right hand towards the ground while activating her gauntlet's pulse-function. The following blast puffed up a cloud of snow towards the sky to hide the girl from view. At that instant, Miste turned on her heels and dashed to the right instead.

Just as she had predicted, Clint's air bullet flew to the left side of the snow cloud. Miste herself emerged from the right side of the cloud and kept on rushing down the street.

The snarling grimace on Clint's face after he realized he'd been tricked was priceless.

"I'm getting sick of the sight of you, brat!!"

"Soon the only thing you'll be seeing are a bunch of stars. Oh, and the bars of a cell, of course."

"Disappear!!"

Clint launched another air bullet to greet the girl rushing uncomfortably close to him.

Miste jumped backwards to dodge the bullet.

While she was busy avoiding the attack, Clint took the opportunity to back away from her. The man clearly knew that his best bet was to stay as far away from Miste as possible.

Miste couldn't help but grin at the flustered state of her opponent.

Hihi! In the end, the gauntlet has a variety of uses… in everything except the one thing I initially designed it for… oh well, what ya gonna do…

Miste would've loved to have her invention working the way it was intended to, so that she could have presented her accomplishment to Coal as a farewell gift.

Miste's heart grew suddenly heavy.

I *wonder what Coal would say if he saw me right now…*

Miste snapped back into the moment as yet another air bullet careened straight for her. She managed to roll out of the way just barely. The air bullet hit the wall of the building behind her and detonated. The pressure of air gave her a firm nudge.

On a quick scan, the exchange just now hadn't brought Miste any closer to Clint.

This ain't gonna cut it. I can keep circling him all day long and he'll just keep retreating and swatting me away with his attacks. I hate to admit it, but I have no choice but to go straight in.

Miste took a single hesitant step, before dashing towards Clint with all the speed she had.

If only I could create other constructs with Yggdrazil's power. It's frustrating to think that I'm sitting on this kind of power, yet unable to wield it fully. So much potential, all going to waste!

Clint glared at the girl dashing towards him with confusion.

“Seems like you’ve lost your wits entirely, girlie! No matter, I’ll show you the extent of your foolishness by smearing you across the street!”

The man gathered a massive amount of air before him, creating a significantly larger air bullet from the rest and launched it at Miste.

Miste prepared to dodge at the last possible second. The scattered thoughts and memories still swirling inside her did their best to draw her attention elsewhere.

I remember this one time I asked Sasha to teach me how to cook. It didn’t turn out that well, it was quite awful actually… I just couldn’t get the hang of it, ended up burning everything. I pretty much gave up after that one time, thinking that it wasn’t meant for me. I still can’t cook for crap. And yet, even though it was obvious that I sucked, and was a lousy student on top of that, Sasha never got fed up with me. She just kept on encouraging me. ‘Don’t worry about it, just try again, a’ight’, that’s what she would say to me. She hugged me so tightly, but not like too tightly, y’know. It always felt how a mother bird cradles its little ones under its wings… all safe and cozy.

Miste felt a feathery stroke against her heart.

Snapping once more back to the present, Miste bounced away from the closing air bullet’s path. The larger size of the bullet ended up being more than just for show; the resulting blast of air was enough to shove Miste to the ground. She climbed back on her feet in a flash. Even though she kept wearing a brave face, the accumulated hurt and fatigue was beginning to weigh on her.

Damn it, this is not enough! I won’t beat him like this!

Clint prepared yet another air bullet, this one even more massive than the last.

The bullet launched for Miste. It came too close too fast – she wouldn't be able to dodge it entirely. Still, *trying* was the only thing she could do. Miste leapt away with all the springiness she had.

If only I was a bird, like Cozo, then I'd simply glide along the winds, instead of getting smacked around by them.

At that moment, a strange sensation hit Miste. It wasn't the explosion of air she was expecting, but rather two palms pushing her forth. A collection of voices rung through Miste's head, loud and clear, like the people in her thoughts were right there beside her.

You can do it, Miste!

Make your dream into reality!

Coal and Sasha. Their words of support were backed up by the gleeful chirp of Cozo. The crimson bird sang out like a soaring trumpet, lifting Miste higher. Miste's right arm suddenly turned extremely light. Before she could react, she found herself launching skyward.

"Waaah!! Woah, woah, woah! What's going on!?"

At first, she thought that the air bullet had sent her flying. That notion dissolved quickly as her momentum slowed down and she was left hanging in the air, dozens of meters above street level.

"You're kidding me, right?! How is this possible?!"

Miste's right hand hovered over her head. The azure energy pouring out from the alaxdrite had created a pair of enormous wings extending outward from her wrist.

Miste gawked at the sight in disbelief.

Not long after her launch up, the wings abruptly dissipated, and Miste went tumbling downward.

"No-no-no-no-no-no!!"

A second or two, and the girl would end up smashed against the street.

"Come on!! Do it again!! Hurry!! *Flyyyyyyyyyyyyyy*!!"

It ended up not quite like flying, but hovering, as the pair of wings burst out anew and with a single powerful flap pulled Miste's fall to a stop just above the street.

Miste dropped softly down to the ground.

Did I really do that? No, of course I did, who else would it be, the question is how…

The wings extending from her wrist looked like real bird wings… well, as much as it was possible for a pair of *wrist wings* made of pure energy to look real.

I was thinking of Cozo… Is that why…?

Clint shouted in bafflement.

"What the hell is this!? What kind of ability is that!?"

Miste struck a confident pose and thrust her right arm towards Clint jubilantly.

"Yeah, that's right – I can fly!! How do you like them apples?"

“No matter what kind of abilities you bring out, it won’t be enough to save you!”

Clint did his usual thing and launched an air bullet towards Miste.

Miste smiled wide at her opponent’s predictability.

Oh, this ain’t all I can do. I have a funny feeling I just hit the motherload, hihii…!!

Miste concentrated her thoughts on the people back in Akrelion, letting their love flow through her.

The wings attached to Miste’s arm made a mighty stroke and she was pulled to glide along the ground, easily dodging the air bullet.

I’ve been looking at this the wrong way from the start! When I first used Yggdrazil’s astral ability, I wished to become strong from all my heart. To use this ability effectively, to create any kind of energy construct I wish for, all I need to do is gather inspiration from within my heart and it’ll take shape.

Miste broke her glide at Clint’s left flank.

“You should work on your aim; you were way off there!”

“Shut up!! Just die!”

Miste used her wings to launch herself towards Clint at an incredible speed.

“Do not get cocky with me, girl!”

As yet another air bullet came careening towards Miste, she pulled her glide to a stop and allowed her wings to dissipate.

Zeri, thank you for loving me. Were it not for you, I would've foolishly given up. You are my hero! You always will be! You give me strength! Unyielding and eternal!

In place of the wings, a sharp and slender object rose outward from within the alaxdrite. A spitting image of Zeriah's sword. Miste grabbed the energy-forged weapon with both hands.

I've watched you do this a thousand times… Here goes!

Miste raised the blade high over her head and brought it down in a single clean cut.

The slash split the air bullet in half.

Two enormous gusts of wind exploded on either side of Miste, blowing outward.

Miste smirked at Clint from behind the energy weapon.

"Your trick is getting old."

"Impossible… you little piece of…"

"Save it, you've brought this upon yourself! If you wanna curse someone, look at a mirror."

Miste dashed towards Clint, letting the blade of energy dissipate.

"No… No! It is not possible! You cannot–"

"Don't tell me what I can and cannot do!"

Clint's voice broke into an unintelligible growl as he began gathering more air for his next attack.

Miste noticed that even though she was getting dangerously close to Clint, the man refused to release his air bullet, deciding to gather even more air. At this rate, should he launch the attack at Miste, he'd end up taking himself out in the process.

Didn't take him for the suicidal type, but I guess that means he's getting desperate… Good!

Clint's demented grin oozed with bloodlust.

"Ha-ha-ha! No matter what, I will put you in your place! Disappear!"

Miste stopped a few meters away from Clint and dropped on one knee. She slammed her arms firmly together in front of her.

People around me wish for me to be safe, they wish for me to succeed! Zeri… Reiram… Freyja… Dani… Yggdrazil… Samsara… Coal… Sasha… They all stand with me as we take on the dangers – together! I will not be crushed by any adversity!!

Clint released his air bullet, or rather an *air cannonball*.

"Die! Die!"

The energy pouring from the alaxdrite gathered before Miste in the shape of a mighty shield.

The detonating air blasted outward like a spontaneous hurricane, crashing against the shield of energy between it and Miste.

The sensation of palms caressing Miste's back returned, only now instead of two, there were dozens of them. They all came together to keep Miste from collapsing under the monstrous storm.

I'm not afraid! As long as I have people telling me to go on, I refuse to give in!

…The storm in front of her subsided.

The energy shield shattered and scattered into nothingness. Miste's body was left numb and heavy, like if someone had stuck a big straw inside her and sucked her dry of energy.

A groan from her left pulled Miste's attention.

Clint had been flung farther down the street by the force of his own attack. The man was struggling to lift himself to stand.

The numbness that was taking over Miste told a clear message: she was at her limit.

I'm not done yet! One last push and this'll be over!

Miste forced herself to stand and rushed towards Clint. She nearly collapsed from exhaustion, yet moved onward. She gathered everything she had, every tiny speck of energy lingering in her body and poured it all into activating Yggdrazil's power one last time.

In the end, it turns out I'm my own worst enemy, calling everything quits before it's truly over. I'm truly lucky to have people around me to wake me up.

Clint had just managed to pull himself up on his knees when Miste reached him. The man glared at the girl, with hate oozing from every speck of his being, yet too tired to form a single word to express his hatred.

Miste returned the glare with a poised stare.

The energy from within Miste burst out to form the simplest shape she knew – a fist, a palm of a giant looming over her.

I'll always stand by my friends, and I know they'll always support me. I might fall, but I will rise anew, always! Rise and fall, smiles and tears, that's who I am, the essence of me…

…The heterochromia within my soul!!!

Miste clutched her hand tighter, and the mass of energy followed her example. Giving her all to the final attack, Miste delivered a punch unlike any other in recorded history.



The fist collided on its target with a satisfying crack.

Clint went flying across the street and slammed against the wall of Muspell Industries.

Miste kept her gaze firm as she looked at the beaten man struggling to stand.

The two combatants' eyes met once more.

Clint kept beaming his hateful ice at the girl, which was met by her own triumphant smirk.

Stay down!

Eventually, Clint's eyelids fell shut and he slumped down, silent and still like a corpse. High over the defeated man, the form of a jet-black avian creature faded away into the midst of the blizzard.

A heavy sigh broke from Miste's lips, and the fist of energy crumbled away. Along her breath, all the remaining strength escaped her body as well.

She stood motionless in the middle of the street. The freezing wind licked her all over. Her throat was dry, her skin tingled, and the feeling from her limbs soon faded away. She had no control over her body, gravity became her only master, inviting her to rest.

She could hear faint voices calling for her from the distance, yet she had no vigor to move her lips to answer.

Is this… dying? I guess I… overdid it a little…

Miste's last sensation was cold snow against her cheek before her world was engulfed by silence and darkness.

VERSE #23: THE END OF BEGINNING

"You know, ever since the first time we met, I always knew you were the one for me. Can you guess how I knew – what made me fall in love with you?"

A faint voice reached out to Miste, words echoing from beyond the veil of darkness… A dream, perhaps?

Who…?

“It was actually the way you blushed when you smiled at me. I guess it sounds kinda silly, but it’s true. Looking at you, I felt like I could read every feeling from your face. You don’t hide the person you are, not even a bit. I know you hate lying, and I’m pretty sure that you’re also incapable of doing so… or at the very least you’re terrible at it.”

A hand cradled Miste’s palm. The emptiness she had been drifting in for who knows how long had made her extra sensitive. The touch was akin to a shock of lightning climbing up her arm, making her entire body tingle.

Zeri…?

“I love you because… no matter what happens, you’ll always be *you*. You’re never afraid to let the inner you shine. You laugh a lot, and you cry a lot, and I think that’s awesome. Even when I feel like nothing makes sense, I can always look at you and know in my heart that I have something everlasting, something eternally honest in my life.”

Caring fingers brushed Miste’s hair.

“I miss you. We all do. I hope you come back to us soon.”

Miste tried reaching towards the sound, but her body refused to move.

A warm breeze caressed Miste’s face, followed by gentle pressure against her lips.

Every inch of her was prickly, sensitive to touch, yet she couldn't act on her instinct to spring up on her feet. It was like a dream she couldn't wake up from.

Miste focused all her strength to her eyelids. They were ridiculously heavy. After struggling for a fair moment, a thin ripple of light broke through the darkness. The way out was just within Miste's grasp, a mere push further.

Little by little, the light kept flooding in, until the crack within the darkness ripped wide open.

Miste woke up to find a pair of lime-green eyes staring at her.

Her voice sounded out as a frail wheeze as she called to her hero.

"Zeri…"

"Miste!? You're awake!"

Zeriah flung himself against Miste and squeezed her in the way a little kid hugs their most precious plushie. After loosening his grip a bit, he began to tremble.

"…You made all of us worry so much!"

"I'm sorry…"

"No, no, I didn't mean it like that. I'm just so glad… for a while I thought you would never wake up."

Zeriah petted Miste's hair while cradling her. A warm droplet slid down Zeriah's cheek and fell on Miste's brow.

"Sorry Zeri, I don't have the strength to hug you back. Hihi… and after I went and promised you the biggest *huggzy-squeezey* you ever had…"

“Hahaha! Oh Miste, you’ll have plenty of time to make up for it. The rest of our lives actually… So don’t worry, I’ll cover for you in the meantime.”

Though Miste’s body still felt numb and heavy, one part of her was wide awake, perky, and dancing in bursting glee – her heart. Resting in Zeriah’s firm embrace, her chest pressed against his, Miste felt truly safe, and happier than ever to be alive.

“Hmm, sneaking kisses from a sleeping maiden, are we?”

Zeriah jumped off Miste and sat down on the edge of her bed.

“Ah! Y–You felt that?”

“Of course I did. Thanks for the lovely wake-up call.”

Miste tried spicing up her words with a winking tone, though due to her weary and raspy state, it ended up coming out rather odd.

Miste did a quick scan of her surroundings, recognizing the familiar warmth and hominess exuding from the mustard-colored walls.

“Are we at the inn…?”

“Yeah. When you passed out, Reiram was the first one to get to you. He carried you here.”

“How long was I out?”

“Almost two days now. You were in pretty bad shape… Right now, you’re more blue than white under those bandages. Thankfully nothing major was broken. The doc who came to treat you wrapped you up and gave you some shots, said the medicine would heal the inner damages as long as you stay

put. I really don't know a lot about that stuff. He was a bit confused though, he said that you seemed to be suffering from serious malnourishment, like if you hadn't eaten a bite in a week!"

"It's probably cos I pushed myself over my limit with Yggdrazil's power… I spent all my energy, that's why I passed out."

"Figures, you were being reckless – again! What else was I supposed to expect."

Miste poked the tip of her tongue out playfully.

"Sorry."

Zeriah turned to stare at the bedroom wall.

"You being reckless ended up winning the day, but…"

His expression became gloomy.

"I can't begin to tell you how scared I was. I really thought I was going to lose you. It was just like that time back in the mines. You were in trouble and I was helpless to do anything…"

"That's not true, Zeri! Without your encouragement, I would've just given up. You saved me!"

Zeriah turned to lay a pleading look on Miste.

"Promise me you won't push yourself like that again. I don't ever want to be this scared again; you hear me?"

The intense green drilling at Miste told more about Zeriah's inner anguish than any words could ever express.

"I promise. Wow, sometimes you manage to sound eerily like Coal!"

Zeriah ruffled Miste's hair.

"That's cos we both feel the same way about you, dummy! Now, be sure to hold on to that promise. You don't want to end hooked up to *that thing* again, now do you?"

Zeriah pointed to the other side of Miste's bed.

Miste turned to have a look. There was a thin tube sticking out from under the skin of her right arm. The tube was connected to a rack with two pouches of clear liquid hanging from it.

"Gaaaah! Wha– I couldn't feel a thing!"

"That gizmo's been feeding you for the past few days."

"Hmm… no wonder I'm starving."

"Hah! I can't blame you. I'll go get you something to eat."

"Wait! H–How is everyone? Is Reiram okay? What about Samsara? And Roger? Did you get Clint? Are Kalila and Albert–"

"Calm down. Everything is fine. You'll get to hear all in due time. I'll go see about that food, so just stay here, okay?"

"I don't think I'd have the strength to move yet, even if I wanted to…"

"Just making sure. You're pretty adventurous girl after all; I turn my back for a sec and you've already found some new trouble."

Zeriah's tone was warm and gentle, he was merely teasing Miste.

"Well, it's a good thing I have so many friends willing to help me out of trouble."

"…And we ain't going nowhere. Not ever."

Zeriah gave Miste a loving rub on the cheek before leaving the bedroom.

* * *

Feeling returned to Miste's limbs gradually while she laid waiting in her bed. Although every part of her still remained stiff, she managed to nudge herself up to sit by leaning against the end of her bunk. She yanked the tube off her arm. With nothing else to focus her attention on, the thing began to irritate her fast.

Zeriah returned in a jiffy with a steaming bowl of soup. The rich aroma of cream and mushrooms made Miste's tummy rumble. Zeriah sat on the edge of Miste's bed and offered her a spoonful.

"Now, say *Aaa*…"

"Uh… I can eat myself…"

A bunch of steps boomed from the hallway.

"Now, now, Mystic-M! You should've seen how worried Big-Z was about you. The whole time you were out, he didn't move an inch from that spot. Let him pamper you a bit…"

Dani had strolled into the room.

"Yo, good to see you awake!"

The boy was followed by an exotic woman with decorative tattoos on her face. Miste guessed her to be that *Ejrica Nekaro* person whom she'd heard over the radio.

"Hi Dani! I'm glad to see you all safe…"

Dani stopped at the end of Miste's bed, grinning at her sunnily.

“Thanks to you we are!”

The exotic woman settled a step behind Dani, with her gaze turned towards the floor. Although she seemed like a reserved person, to Miste, there was also something instantly inviting about her. Maybe it was the soft gleam of her deep eyes, or the finely tailored yet casual clothes she wore… or maybe it was the way she kept taking subtle warm ganders at Dani.

“Hi there!”

“Ah, my apologies! My name is Ejrica Nekaro, it is joyous to make your acquaintance, Miste. I’m relieved to find you unharmed. Dani has been telling quite a lot about you.”

Ejrica bowed deep. Miste returned her greeting by raising her right arm.

“Nice to meetcha too. I hope that all Dani has told you has been good–”

“Actually, I believe he’s already told me basically everything he knows about you by this point. Once he gets going it is a challenge to cool him down…”

“Oh, I guess that’s… great?”

“Do not fret. By all accounts, I’ve determined you to be quite the remarkable person. Your nimble thinking saved us from our pinch.”

“Thanks… I don’t really know about *that remarkable* though…”

Suddenly, the strange feeling of something being badly amiss hit Miste.

“Wait– where’s Yggdrazil?!”

Dani revealed Miste’s gauntlet from the holster on his waist.

“Don’t worry, I’ve been holding on to ol’ *Yggy* for you.”

Dani placed the metal glove on the nightstand. The blue alaxdrite embedded on it gave a lively shimmer as Miste’s eye reflected upon it.

“Good to see you as well, Yggdrazil!”

The trial by fire that Miste had thrown herself in had made her better understand Yggdrazil’s power. She had truly given her all in the battle against Clint Kazer. The girl hoped in her heart that her efforts would make Yggdrazil proud, for all she wanted was for the astra to be partnered with a worthy Bearer.

The tip of a spoon tapped against Miste’s lips.

“Come on, Miste, you have to eat now. Here.”

Zeriah shoved the spoonful of boiling mushroom soup down Miste’s throat.

“Gaah!! At least blow on it first, jeez…!”

“Quit complaining, it’s best when it’s warm. Open wide.”

“What about yourself? You’ve been just sitting here this whole time, right? You should eat too!”

“Kalila brought me plenty of food while I waited. Enough talk. Eat.”

Zeriah shoveled the soup into Miste’s mouth with gusto.

Sitting all quiet while being nursed by Zeriah, all the while Dani and Ejrica watched, made Miste’s cheeks burn from embarrassment. The sly grin that rose on Zeriah’s lips upon Miste’s blushing gave the sense that he was enjoying his position a little bit too much…

“So, how’s the soup?”

“Well, I don’t exactly have much room to savor it when you keep pouring it down my throat like that. What am I, a goose?!”

“I just want to see you up on your feet as soon as possible.”

Dani leaned down on the end of the bed with an adoring smirk, as if he was watching some baby animal being fed by its mother.

“Relish the attention, Mystic-M! After all that has happened, you deserve some love and caring. In fact, I’m a bit jealous! I wouldn’t mind if *a special someone* was to show *me* that kind of affection…”

Dani craned his neck towards Ejrica.

“Wh–why exactly are you looking at me…?”

“Oh, nothing in particular, simply tossing ideas.”

“Well, try to keep some ideas to yourself, I wouldn’t want you to run out.”

The exotic woman averted her gaze as far from Dani as she could.

Miste let out a tiny giggle. Dani was absolutely right! She could already feel her strength returning.

“Alright Zeri, soup me up! Aa…”

“There’s a good little birdie.”

A weighty thump of boots climbed up the staircase and paced through the hallway to Miste’s bedroom.

“So, the little missy is finally awake, huh?”

Reiram strolled into the room.

Dani turned for the elder Adventurer with a snarky grin.

“Oh, I see how it is – too cool to make an entrance with the rest of us, eh, Rei-Rei?”

“Shut your pie hole!”

Reiram smacked Dani on the head as he walked past him. He marched to the right side of Miste’s bed.

“Had enough beauty sleep for one go?”

“Plenty, thanks for asking!”

Miste peppered her retort with a pouty face.

“You’re one to talk, Reiram! Last time I saw, you seemed to be enjoying your own nappy time. Strange location though; if someone else saw you sleeping in the middle of the street, they’d probably take you for a drunkard… Hmpf!”

Miste was unable to keep up her abrasive façade for long. Her pout melted to reveal a soft smile.

“But seriously… Thank you, Reiram, for helping me. When I passed out, you were the one who carried me here, right?”

“Just as soon as I was done napping, yes. Freyja told me everything that happened while I was out. You gave her a hell of a scare with that stunt of yours! What a bothersome girl – you knew full well I was fine, and yet you just had to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“I had to do something. I was scared, and felt so powerless, and then I saw you get hurt, it was… I just snapped, okay! It was like back when we first met – you got hurt in my place and

saved my life. Ever since then, I've wanted to somehow repay your help!"

"You wanted to pay me back for saving your life… by almost throwing your own life away? Next time, please don't. I've got enough on my plate without that hotheaded boyfriend of yours accusing me for getting you killed."

Miste knew that she had done the right thing, even if it was reckless. And still, the fact that she had made other people worry brought back bad memories of Coal from a week ago. He'd been so disappointed with her. Just thinking about it hurt, more than any kind of beating ever could.

"I'm… sorry… to be a bother…"

A thin tear dropped from Miste's right eye. A thumping pressure behind her eye made the whole right side of her face hurt.

Reiram yanked the brim of his hat to cover his face.

"Give me a break! Here come the waterworks. I thought that a bit of fisticuffs would temper your spirit at least somewhat."

Miste swiftly wiped her face dry.

"Well, I'm sorry for caring so much."

The judging gazes of everyone in the room made Reiram rub his cheek in embarrassment.

"All I'm trying to say is that you should focus your affection towards those really needing it. I'll bounce back on my feet by myself."

"I know you won't die, but… it still hurts, right?"

"You get used to the pain."

Miste shook her head, partly in defiance, partly to get rid of the annoying sensation pounding behind her right eye. She turned to gaze at Reiram with fire radiating from her entire being.

“I will never get used to seeing my friends being hurt!!”

Reiram spent a moment returning the girl’s adamant gaze. He broke out with a low-key chuckle.

“I see… so that’s the kind of Adventurer you’ll be? Guess it can’t be helped.”

He gave Miste a quick nod.

“You are still a fledgling little thing, so you got some kinks to iron out if you’re going to continue on this road you’ve chosen. Although, at the same time, all things considered… you did well, kid. Just try not to get yourself hospitalized the next time you decide to help someone, deal?”

Miste could see soft waves glimmering deep within Reiram’s sky-blue gaze, a plea almost entirely hidden away by the man’s otherwise stern look.

The girl nodded with a smile.

“Hihi – deal!”

“Good. Now then, there’s still one more thing to do…”

Reiram lifted his hand over Miste and gave her a sharp chop on the head.

“Ooowie…! What the heck was that for!? …I’m still recovering.”

“We shall call it even; you’ve paid me back in full. I told you back in Akrelion that you were *going to get it* once this ordeal was all over, didn’t I?”

“Yea… but you didn’t have to be so rough… ow, ow, ow…”

Zeriah shot a thin beam of lime-green lightning towards Reiram.

“If you’re done assaulting my girlfriend, you can leave. She needs to rest.”

“Stop fussing, Zeri. With all you guys around, I feel better already!”

Miste caressed Zeriah’s arm with the tips of her fingers.

“…*Much* better.”

“Miste…”

For a moment, the couple got lost in their exchange of tender looks.

A whistle from Dani broke the silence.

“We prolly should give these two some space…”

Miste’s heart thumped softly against her chest, her cheeks tickling red. She giggled gently and shook her head.

“No, I’d like you guys to stay a while. I know it hasn’t been long, but I’ve really missed us being like this, together. And besides, I want to hear about everything that’s happened while I was sleeping!”

A cautious double-knock on the doorframe made everyone turn their heads.

Kalila Jolovia stood by the door.

“Uhm… may I come in?”

It took a moment from Miste to realize that everyone else were waiting for her reply.

“Oh…! Y–Yeah, of course. Hello, Kalila. H–How’s it going?”

The innkeeper paced by Miste's bed. The usual high-spirited-perky-glee that oozed from the woman now felt subdued. She gave Miste a smile, though it was noticeably held up only via the woman's strength of will. Miste couldn't blame her.

"How are you feeling, Miste?"

"*Me*? I, uhm… I'm alright. It'll be just a sec and I'll be up 'n' running, don't you worry."

Kalila sighed heavily while clutching her chest. It was as if a huge weight had just melted away from covering her heart.

"I'm so glad. Thank goodness…"

However, the rush of relief wasn't enough to wash away the sorrow that Kalila hid behind her wavering smile.

The innkeeper's grief tugged at Miste's heart. Seeing Kalila like this – her natural peppiness growing weak like the last few cinders of a cooling fireplace – was exactly what the girl had been dreading. Kalila was entirely innocent to her husband's actions, yet she and her son would be the ones to suffer the heaviest punishment for his mistakes. It was wrong, no one deserved to go through something like this.

"Kalila, I… I'm really sorry for everything."

"What? No, no, no, don't… Why would you… I'm the one who's sorry…"

Kalila cradled her face inside her hands. Muffled sobbing seeped through her mask as she turned away from Miste.

"…Forgive me…"

"Kalila…"

The woman took long breaths to calm herself. She tapped her eyes dry on her laced apron and turned to face Miste.

"…When I first heard about all that had happened, I couldn't believe it… I didn't *want* to believe it. I've now slowly come to grasp just how foolish I was, unable to see the truth before it was too late."

Kalila kept looking at Miste bravely. Even though a flood of tears was constantly on the verge of breaching the woman's mental barricade, she tucked away her pain.

"Hold no worry over me, for I am alright. I refuse to let this break me, not just for my sake, but for Albert."

Kalila took a wet breath as she spoke.

"More importantly, I can't begin to express my relief to see you finally awake, Miste. When Reiram first brought you here, I was horrified. I couldn't bear it if you had… oh, I can't even say it! I'll be eternally grateful to all of you wonderful people for risking your lives. Roger… he is alive, and it's all thanks to each of you. I can only hope that you'll find it in your hearts not to resent my family for what you've gone through–"

"Kalila! It's alright, as far as it's possible in the current light of things anyway. I'm still having hard time believing Roger doing what he did. I don't think he's a bad person, and I certainly do not resent any of you!"

Upon hearing Miste's words, Kalila froze in place.

A collection of agreeing remarks from everyone in the room came to back up Miste.

A warm smile spread on Kalila's trembling lips. She dropped slowly to a deep bow.

“Thank you all… thank you…”

A sudden squeak of a floorboard made Miste glance towards the door.

Peeking from the hallway while hiding behind the doorframe was Albert. The young boy looked silently at her mother, his expression calm and cold. Once the boy realized he’d been noticed he swiftly turned on his heels and stomped down the hallway.

“Albert – wait!”

Miste’s shout got no response, except for the door to Albert’s room slamming shut tightly.

Miste could only imagine how Albert must’ve been feeling. The girl herself had come to face the dread of losing someone dear to her numerous times, but never like this. Roger would disappear from his son’s life.

Thinking about how lost she had felt all alone in the orphanage when she was Albert’s age, Miste felt truly grateful for all the loving people she now had in her life.

“Don’t worry, Miste. Albert is a strong boy. I’m sure he’ll one day come to terms with the choices his father made.”

“Would it help if I talked to him?”

“I think what he needs now is some space to think things over. Knowing him, he’ll soon be back to his usual stuff, tinkering and studying. He really wants to be like his father, the best he can be. I’m so proud of him. Would you believe it – whenever I felt anxious without Roger around, he always sensed it. He’d come to me and say, *Mom, don’t be sad, I’ll be here always*.

Such a sweet child. I know he'll keep that promise, after all, he's the man of the house now."

Kalila cut herself a bit short, realizing that she'd talk everyone's ears off about her son were someone not to stop her. She minced for the door in a fit of embarrassment.

"But my! Look at the time already. Tell you what, how about I draw a bath for you, Miste? I bet it would do you good."

The thought of a nice and warm soak made the cumulated smudge all over Miste's body to itch like crazy.

"That would be wonderful, thanks."

"Leave it to me."

A tiny bit of the innkeeper's usual perkiness had returned to her voice. She fluttered down the hallway to get Miste's bath ready.

Dani followed in Kalila's footsteps and strutted for the door.

"Man, all this talking is making me mighty hungry! I'll go check if there's still some of that soup left in the kitchen. How 'bout you, Ejrica, you coming?"

"Fine, but don't you go thinking for a second that I'm going to be feeding you…"

"Y to the E to the S, ma'am!"

"Ugh… Let's just go!"

Reiram left for the door in the duo's wake.

"Let's talk more later. Don't go drowning in the tub, kid."

Miste sent the elder Adventurer off by faking laughter.

“Yeah, yeah! Don’t expect me to come to your rescue again anytime soon, senior!”

“You two kids aren’t Adventurers just yet – leave the *senior*-stuff till that.”

Reiram threw a lazy wave Miste’s way before leaving the room.

Miste and Zeriah were left sitting alone. The girl swooned from side to side whilst beaming and humming.

“What are you all smiles for?”

“Just feel like smiling, that’s all. Little by little, everything’s working itself out.”

“Are you sure about that bath, though? Can you even move?”

“I already feel a lot better. I think I can walk if I take it slow.”

“Okay, just be extra careful. Gimme a shout if you need help with anything.”

Miste gave Zeriah’s nose a playful poke.

“Oh, but I already have a plan for you…”

“You do?”

“Of course.”

She leaned closer to Zeriah and nuzzled his ear gently.

“I don’t think I’m fully healed just yet; I may be a little stiff in places… So, I’ll need you to bathe me, Zeri.”

“Is that so…”

Miste giggled gleefully as Zeriah moved closer to kiss her cheek and tickle her tummy.

* * *

Later that day, Samsara came to visit Miste, right after she heard that the girl was awake.

For the past day, the lady knight had been busy investigating the events leading up to Clint Kazer's attempt for hostile takeover of Muspell Industries.

Apparently, it had all started when Clint had by chance discovered Roger Jolovia to be an Astral Bearer. He'd concocted a plan to use Roger to do his dirty work by threatening his family, practically keeping them hostage without them ever knowing a thing. The fact that Clint turned out to be a powerful Astral Bearer himself came to show that he was truly a man who took great satisfaction from using other people as tools. Should he have needed an agent of great power to put his plans to motion, surely, he could have done it himself as well.

Clint had made Roger to cause chaos at the alaxdrite mines throughout the northern province. The purpose for this had been twofold. Firstly, to cause financial disarray at the mines, making them fall in debt, leaving them no choice but to sell their assets to Muspell Industries, and this way increasing the power of the company. The second reason, a far more dastardly one at that, was to paint the mysterious hooded man running amuck as a terrorist.

The final phase of the plan was to have Roger fake an attack upon Muspell Industries' headquarters. With the help from the leading member of the company's security force, Rio, the conspirers had managed to put on a rather convincing show. By leading the security guards astray, Clint made sure that all

who served no further purpose to him would soon disappear. The bomb they had hidden in the building would explode, killing everyone: Roger, the guards, Clint's own brother Sur… as well as the party of unwanted intruders who had managed to infiltrate the building. Clint had planned to escape the building, faking to the rest of the world to have made it by the skin of his teeth.

In the end, all knowledge of Clint's criminal deeds would be wiped out, leaving him as the sole heir to the Muspell legacy.

Furthermore, Roger would be the one taking the fall as the culprit. With him dead, Clint would be free to paint his former lackey any way he would please in the investigations that would follow. There'd be no one to question him.

Clint Kazer was truly a ruthless, scheming waste of a human being. Surely, his plan would've worked perfectly, were it not for the interference of a particular group of eccentric people.

During Samsara's investigations after the clearing of the smoke, the whole staff of Muspell Industries had been very cooperative – even the security force. Partly helping in that was Sur Muspell's empathetic and wise leadership. He had stricken a deal with the lady knight, one stating that any and all personnel giving their full cooperation to help Captain Samsara Talmond to get to the bottom of things would be pardoned for their hostile actions against the knight. None of the workforce – barring Rio that is – were part of the conspiracy, and as such were less than pleased with the idea of going to jail for simply following orders.

There was still much more investigating and work to be done. The company would most likely have to do some reforming in its personnel, but at least no innocents would suffer.

After hearing that his family was safe, and that Clint would be put to answer for his actions, Roger Jolovia had surrendered to Samsara and put himself in willing confinement at the company's main building, waiting for the time he would be transported to face trial and suffer his punishment proper.

As for Clint, the beating Miste had given him had mangled enough bones to render the man unable to move a muscle in quite a long time – he wasn't going anywhere. As Samsara informed Miste of this, there was obvious satisfaction in the lady knight's voice.

Rio, Clint's right-hand woman, was put to confinement as well. For the past two days, the woman had constantly kept up a fight, banging on the door of her confinement cell and demanded to see *Master Kazer*. Strangely enough, there seemed to be one person in the world who held pure revere for the utterly despicable man.

Everything was turning out right in the end. The guilty would be punished, and the lives of innocents were saved. Mr. Muspell had also promised to return all assets swindled from the mines, as well as to cover all damages caused by his brother's actions.

At the same time, regrettably, the law was clear, and so the situation with Roger Jolovia and his family couldn't be helped…

Samsara let Miste have a thorough scolding over her irresponsible behavior. Although, she also congratulated her,

as well as thanked her wholeheartedly as a representative of the Knights of Minerva for the girl's invaluable service in upholding the justice of the Crown.

"I truly hope you'll hold your course, Miste. I wish you and Zeriah the best of luck. Both of you will make exemplary Adventurers."

Samsara tried offering her hand for a shake, to which the girl replied by opening her arms wide. After a second of hesitance, the lady knight agreed upon the hug. To Miste, this way felt more natural, for no matter what Samsara's standing was as an officer of law, to her she was first and foremost a dear friend.

"…Thank you for everything, Samsara."

After Miste's cuddling kept on just a tad too long, Samsara gracefully pulled away. The woman patted the girl on the shoulder whilst laying an assessing look on her.

"A warrior in the making one moment – a peppy young lady the next? Tch, it's a bit hard to get a full read on you. You've been through quite a lot this past week, perhaps you should be in touch with your loved ones back home? I'm sure that *Sasha* would appreciate it."

"Right! I was actually thinking the same."

* * *

After a dozen or so failed attempts to start writing a letter, Miste decided it was time to cut the crap and simply call home.

Kalila was kind enough to let Miste use the phone at the tavern free of charge.

A soft rattle of the dial wheel, a click of the transceiver being lift, a static echo in Miste's ear as she waited for a response…

Akrelion – her home. Though the girl had traveled so far from the place that had raised her, it was still so close, so simple to reach, or at least a snippet of it was.

It hadn't been that long since Miste's departure by any stretch, and yet, the thought of getting to speak with folks back home was enough to lift a whirlwind of emotions within her. The anticipation was at once painful, exciting, and scary.

Miste took a deep breath to ease her anxiety.

Alright Miste, whatever happens, don't you cry!

A clatter resounding from a faraway place carried to Miste's ear.

"Hello?"

Sasha's voice, a warm and fluffy chirp, so tender, it was just like Miste remembered it.

Miste could see Sasha clearly in her mind. Her voice came out so vivid, like she was standing right next to her. Miste wanted to immediately jump into the woman's arms and give her the biggest hug. The fact that she couldn't express her joy physically made her instantly burst into tears.

Well, so much for that plan…

"Hello…?"

"Hi, Sasha. It's me, Mi–"

"Miste! How have you been, love? It's so good to hear your voice."

Miste wiped her cheeks and turned to face the wall of the tavern to save the others from witnessing her waterworks.

“It’s awesome to hear your voice too, Sasha. I’m doing fine.”

“Hmm, only *fine*?”

“Heh, well… on a scale of one to ten, I’m somewhere around eight at the moment, positively peachy! How’s everything back home?”

“Oh, not much new. It’s so quiet without you and Zeriah around. Berryjam’s been sobbing nonstop since you left… But don’t worry, a little heartache ain’t nothing a good bottle of booze among us girls won’t fix. She told me to say hi whenever I’d hear from you. So, *hi*!”

Hearing Sasha’s mother-bird-esque voice had Miste smiling through her tears.

“Tell Miss Berryjam I miss her too! And her baking!”

“Sure thing. Well, tell me, how’s the life on the road? Have you two been safe?”

“Everything’s been… real great. I’ve already seen so much and met so many wonderful people, it’s… it’s been everything I ever hoped it would be.”

“Hmhmhm, I’m happy for you. Did you by any chance manage to catch that evildoer you were after?”

“Yeah, actually we did! It wasn’t easy, lemme tell ya. It was pretty dangerous as well, but don’t worry – we all came out in one piece at the end.”

“Oh-ho, aren’t you being straight about it! Most people would try to say something along the lines of, *Nah, it was a piece of cake, no worries*, or some such…”

“I would never lie to you, Sasha. You know that.”

“Aww, you’re sweet!”

A gleeful song of a bird came whistling over the phone.

“Cozo wants to say hello! He misses ya too.”

“Ah… I… I miss you guys too… real… bad…”

Miste covered the phone’s speaker with her hand as she began to sob uncontrollably.

“Hmhmhm, my, my, are you crying?”

“I’m not crying… I mean… maybe… a little…”

“That makes me glad.”

“Huh?”

“You haven’t changed a bit, Miste.”

“Yeah… I guess I haven’t. Listen, Sasha, I was wondering–”

A gruff bellow sounded over the phone.

“Hey! Is that Miste you talking to? You told her about that Muspell fellow yet? Said he’d be sending us a brand-spanking-new ex-caver free of charge! Well, I for one could have lived without another one of those hunk o’ junks, but if he insists that’s fine. Tell Miste thanks, apparently he’s some kind of friend of hers. I’m *so* grateful, I *love* being in debt over things I didn’t ask for, now I have to send him a gift basket or something in return, just what I needed in my life, just perfect…”

The sound of the familiar man continued as background noise.

“Was that Coal!?”

“Yeah, he says he misses you too.”

“I see… could you ask him on the phone?”

“Sure thing.”

“Oh, and could you also stay nearby?”

“Hmhmhm, I’ll be right here, love.”

A moment later, Coal’s voice came booming over the phone.

“Hi, Miste. Been a while.”

“It has, glad to hear your voice!”

“This ol’ baaing? Hah! If ya fancy listening to a washed-up goat like me, I ain’t judging you, to each their own.”

The man’s voice sent a wave of nostalgia splashing over Miste. It was a voice that encapsulated the feeling of home to her.

“You’ve been making a name for yourself out there, haven’t ya? We’ve had some calls from people in some mighty high places! You heard me prattle about that Muspell fella?”

“Yes, and don’t worry about being in debt or anything, he’s just trying to be nice–”

“I know he’s being nice! He’s friends with you, so of course he’s nice. That’s not all… I also got a call yesterday from one *Samsara Talmond*. Nice lady, firm and straight to the point, I like her. She told me you’ve been involved in some dangerous stunts, saved quite a lot of people by meddling and being reckless.”

What exactly did Samsara tell him…!?

“Coal, I–”

“Now, I ain’t gonna come raining down on you for being the stupid kid you are, I bet everyone else has already done enough of that. Just make sure you keep yourself in one piece as you travel, sound good?”

“I will.”

Coal grunted noddingly. Miste heard the man taking a taste of his cigarette.

“Listen, Coal, there’s something I wanted to say, about that thing a week ago–”

“Nah, don’t go starting about that! I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

“No, please, just listen. I really need to tell you this. Is Sasha there too?”

“She’s right here.”

“What’s the matter, love? You sound upset…”

Miste took a deep breath to clear her mind. She had an important suggestion to talk over with the duo back home. It would change… no, *solidify* the way she held the two within her heart.

“My journey thus far has given me a lot to think about. I’ve been faced with many troubles, but I made it through because I always held the people I care about close to my heart. Coal, Sasha, I can never fully tell you how much you mean to me. I am now who I am because of you two. I am me, and I’ll always be me – Miste. That said… it’s sometimes pretty awkward to introduce myself as simply *Miste*. So, I was thinking that maybe… if it would be alright… that from now on I could… perhaps… introduce myself as *Miste Gauntlett*?”

A prolonged silence loomed on the other end of the phone line.

Miste cursed herself silently. Perhaps she was being arrogant to suggest something like this.

“Are you still there, Coal?”

“Idiot!!!”

Miste flinched from surprise as Coal suddenly bellowed at the top of his lungs. The shout was followed by a muffled weep.

Miste had to focus her courage to speak again.

“Are you… crying?”

“No, I am not… well, maybe… a little… What the hell kind of question is that anyway!?”

Coal gritted his teeth to hold back his emotions.

“Of course it’s fine! You are *our* little girl, Miste! You’ve always been our little girl!”

Sasha picked the phone from Coal.

“We love you, Miste, and we want you to be happy! We’re so proud of you! What you’re saying is…”

“I know, I’m sorry it took me this long to ask you guys!”

The trio kept on talking for a good while.

Miste shared stories of her adventures, of the friends she had made, and of all she had learned. Coal and Sasha listened to their daughter’s tales; the pride and joy they held over her success sounding clear in their laughter.

“Miste, wherever in the world you may be, never let it bring you down. You have already proven to be stronger than that, you hear!”

“If you ever need us, we’ll be right here for you, love. So don’t be afraid to call, a’ight?”

“I promise, thank you… mom… dad…”

To say those two simple words… its significance was something that Miste was sure she could never fully explain to anyone. A feeling most binding, yet liberating all the same.

“See ya around.”

Once Miste ended the call, she felt Zeriah wrapping his hands around her from behind.

Miste’s face was all red and bloated from crying, yet her tears still wouldn’t stop. She remained staring at the wall of the tavern.

“How are you feeling, Miste?”

“I’m peachy. I truly am. I’m Sorry, Zeri, for being such a crybaby.”

“It’s alright.”

“I miss home, I’ll always be missing home…”

“I know… I know.”

Zeriah kept cradling the girl until the last of her tears had poured out.

Unbeknownst to the couple, a pair of eyes just a bit wet from sorrow, belonging to a young boy, kept looking at them in secret.

* * *

The gang agreed that they would be on their way once Miste had regained her strength completely. Not that surprisingly,

the girl already insisted being as fine as she'd ever be. And so, it was decided that the group would depart Powderberg on the next train.

On the morning of departure, Miste, Zeriah, Reiram and Dani were gathered at the tavern of Snow Top Inn. Samsara and Mr. Muspell would be coming to say their goodbyes before noon.

To celebrate the occasion, Kalila was serving her special menu for breakfast. Egg and bacon sandwiches, pancakes with apple-boysenberry jam, along some freshly squeezed blood grape nectar.

"Eat up everyone! You need strength for the road. More tea, anyone? Can I get you refills? My, to have this place so full of life, it just fills me with energy! It's such a shame you have to leave. Where will you be heading next?"

Everyone's gazes immediately turned to Reiram.

"I for one will be returning to Magna Crux, I need to report at Hex Nova that my mission was a success. The Adventurer trial will be held in a few weeks, so I guess those two striplings and I will be having the same trip…"

Zeriah sneered at Reiram.

"The deal was to travel together until Powderberg, right? No need to keep us as baggage anymore."

"No, no, I think it's best I see you to the capital myself. Who knows what kind of trouble you two will get tangled up in if I'm not there to shepherd you."

"Wow, *gee*, thanks…"

Miste slipped her hand over Zeriah's shoulder in a calming manner.

“Thank you, Reiram. We appreciate it.”

Dani finished his way-too-big-of-a-bite in a hurry, nearly choking on it.

“Don’t forget about me! I’ll be swinging by the Guild too; I need to get to my next assignment pronto. After all, money doesn’t make itself!”

“I could probably never forget you, fate knows I’d love to…”

Dani leaned closer to Reiram.

“Sounds like someone’s being all *grumpy* again.”

“I am not grumpy!”

A cloud of iridescent dust swirled around Reiram. Freyja’s projection appeared to flutter next to him.

“Settle down everyone. Kalila has gone through the trouble of preparing such a feast for us – show some manners.”

The lady astra smiled at the innkeeper. Kalila responded to the ethereal woman with a flustered curtsy.

“You’re being too kind, Miss Freyja.”

Although Reiram had introduced his astral partner to Kalila earlier, it was apparent that the innkeeper was still getting used to the fact that such fantastical creatures truly walked amongst ordinary men.

“…Is there anything I can do for you?”

“We astra do not consume food, we merely live by our partners. All the caring you’ve shown towards my Bearer is at the same time caring shown towards me. I thank you for your hospitality.”

Kalila curtsied once more.

A set of steps soft enough to barely emit any sound floated down the stairs and towards the tavern. Ejrica stopped by the doorway and gave the room a deep bow.

“Good morning everyone.”

Kalila fluttered to meet the exotic woman as she stepped inside the tavern.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. I can’t recall the last time I’ve slept on a mattress; it was quite relaxing. Thank you.”

Ejrica came to meet the gang.

“You’ll all be leaving today, yes?”

Her gaze went through everyone sitting around the table.

As Ejrica and Miste’s eyes met, Miste found herself staring at the beauty with admiration. Being around an attractive, dark and exotic lady such as Ejrica Nekaro – someone only a few years older than herself and yet radiating an air of unmatched confidence – as a woman, Miste couldn’t help but feel a bit intimidated.

“It’s a shame I didn’t get to talk to you more, Miss Nekaro…”

“Ah yes, my apologies! I completely forgot… I’ve given everyone present the liberty to address me by my given name, you do so as well, Miste. We’ve all faced the same challenges on the field of battle, and as such, in my culture’s eyes, we’re all siblings.”

The exotic beauty gave Miste a firm smile.

“Okay, Ejrica it is.”

Reiram tapped the table sharply to get Miste's attention.

"Just so you know, Miste, Ejrica here is a Serestrian. Their customs are quite different from us Zirinians. The fact she has given us this privilege is no trite matter. Remember to be grateful for such courtesy."

"Right! Thank you, Miss Nekaro, I mean Miss Ejrica, I mean Ejrica! Boo… I messed that up royally!"

"Heh, no need to be nervous, Miste. It's really not that big of a deal."

Dani leaned lazily against his chair while poking at his dish with a fork.

"It really sucks that this'll be goodbye. We just got through all the dangerous stuff; we barely got any time to truly mingle! But we all got our duties, and I guess you have to get back to your training, right Ejrica?"

"Yes… that was actually the thing I wished to discuss with you all."

Ejrica crossed her arms behind her back.

"I've been watching your group for a few days now and I've come to see you as honorable, capable people. I strongly believe that if I were to spend more time around people like you, it would be greatly beneficial to my own growth. The bottom line is this – if you are to have me, I'd very much like to travel with you and attend the Adventurer trial alongside Miste and Zeriah."

She bowed at the group.

"Please."

Before anyone else could give an answer, Dani jumped to stand.

“Yes!!OfCourseIt’sOkayIfYouReallyWantToWhyWouldn’tItBeOkayICan’tSeeAnyReasonAndIdon’tThinkAnyoneElseCanEitherRight… Right? – Right!?”

“Sure, sounds fun! What do you say, Zeri?”

“No objections here. How ‘bout Mr. Grumpypants?”

“Tch, I don’t care either way.”

Dani threw himself to hug Ejrica.

“Then it’s decided! Welcome aboard!”

Ejrica pushed Dani away.

“Please refrain from touching me. It is not as if I’m coming because of you or anything.”

Just then, something came fluttering from behind Ejrica’s shoulder. A tiny lady with the appearance of a flower bud and a mischievous expression. The little creature danced through the air and dropped down on the table.

“Don’t you guys dare forget about me… Ejrica and I are a combo deal, you hear me!”

“Sakuya, I don’t think anyone’s forgotten about you.”

“…You never know.”

Miste’s eyes popped wide as she stared at the tiny astra.

“So cute!!”

She tried reaching for the creature with her hand. The little one nimbly dodged away.

“Don’t just get all *touchy-feely* right away!”

“Ah, sorry…”

“I mean jeez, even Dani had to work his way up to that with Ejrica–”

“Would you just let it go with the *touchy-feely* stuff!!”

Ejrica glared at her astra with murderous intent. The little one promptly ignored Ejrica’s foaming and pranced around the table.

The high stack of pancakes with dark jam oozing between the seams seemed to interest the tiny astra.

“These look like yummies! Ejrica, try these!”

“In a bit, Sakuya…”

…Ejrica’s murderous tone had yet to fully subside.

Sakuya kept fluttering around the table while giggling like a child. She spent a moment appraising Freyja before calling out to her fellow astra.

“Looks like there’s going to be a *biiiiiig buuuuuunch* of us traveling together, let’s have a good time together, auntie.”

“A–A–Auntie…?! At least call me *big sister* or something…”

Reiram began laughing dryly.

“It’s pretty spot on if you ask me! You are ancient, after all.”

“Well, no one asked you anything, hmpf!”

The front door of the inn clattered open.

A party of three entered the tavern: Samsara, Mr. Muspell, and a very, very massive man with a funny mustache whom Miste did not recognize.

Samsara led the trio to meet the group of Adventurers.

“Greetings! The time to depart is near approaching, so I’ll keep my part short… Thank you all once more for everything, and may your journey be a safe one.”

The lady knight laid a prolonged look on Reiram.

“That includes you too, just so you know.”

“It was good to see you all grown, little Sammy.”

“Right…”

Samsara sharply stepped aside.

Mr. Muspell kept rubbing his neck as he stepped forth.

“I’m not much for speeches either, so I’ll be brief. Thank you and good luck.”

Brief was quite accurate.

“…I do have one thing to discuss with Miste though.”

The man pulled a chair for himself and sat down next to Miste.

“I trust you’ve given my offer some thought.”

“I have. I’m sorry, but I have to decline.”

“I was expecting that to be honest… Are you *absolutely sure* you won’t reconsider?”

“Yes, my path lies elsewhere. I’ll become an Adventurer and help the world by being the best one I can be. These past few days have been overwhelming; a fledgling tinkerer like me

could normally only dream of a chance like this. I already got to share my invention with the head of Muspell Industries himself, so that's like a *I can die happy* -moment right there!"

Miste gandered at the gauntlet on her right arm.

"As for my prototype here, I think it's doing its job just fine as it is. I'll leave the designs to your care, Mr. Muspell. I hope you'll find some use for them."

"Leave it to me! Sounds like you've really thought this through. Don't worry, I'm not going to start begging or anything… but if you ever have second thoughts, the offer's always open."

Mr. Muspell patted Miste on the back.

"For now, you go out there and make your dreams into reality!"

The massive man with the funny stache cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention.

"I would like to say something."

Dani beamed a sly grin at the man.

"Well, well… If it isn't *Rex Stouttjaw, two T's before the J, remember it well*. Fancy seeing you up and about."

Rex cleared his throat once more, making others question what exactly was stuck in there.

"Quite right. I would just like to give my apologies on behalf of the entire security force. I know that it isn't a real justification for our actions, but I want you to understand that me and everyone else were only following our orders, blindly as it may have been. From now on, our justice will be stronger than ever, for not only will we be following our boss's wishes, but

also those of our hearts! Nothing like this will ever come to pass again, I assure you! Please forgive us."

Rex ended his speech with a manly pound against his chest.

Mr. Muspell lifted his arm, like asking a turn to speak.

"Just so you know, I didn't put him up to this. He insisted on coming along."

Dani gathered the limelight of the room as he pranced next to Rex. The boy gave the man almost twice his size a condescending pat on the shoulder.

"It would be uncool to leave bad blood behind, so let's call it water under the bridge. Sound good to everyone?"

A collection of nodding answers filled the tavern.

Miste noticed Zeriah clutching his hands into fists. His face held no anger, he looked more like he was excited.

Zeriah had told Miste about his battle with Rio, and how he'd barely come out on top – thanks to his weapon. Miste guessed that Rex's presence had caused those memories to resurface.

The girl grabbed hold of Zeriah's arm.

"Are you alright, Zeri?"

"I'm peachy, don't worry."

Zeriah kissed Miste on the forehead.

Rex swatted Dani aside as he marched to meet Ejrica. He stopped right in front of the exotic woman, looming over her like a mountain.

"I was hoping I'd find you here."

"That so?"

“Mm, I’ll never forget such strength… That crushing might left a permanent impression on me. We are in the middle of recruiting, actually, and I was holding hope that I’d get to ask you to join our security force. You’d be a wonderful asset, no doubt.”

Ejrica pressed her chin against the back of her hand, deep in thought. She flung a wasp-like-sting-of-a-look at Dani.

“Hmm, that is actually an interesting offer.”

Dani’s expression melted into an unrecognizable pile of sludge. Miste was sure that the boy was about to cry any second.

“But… but… Ejrica… you said that you’d…”

Ejrica’s face exploded into a sudden radiating smile.

“…It was a joke!!”

“…eh…!”

“Dani?”

“…I may be young, but I don’t think my heart can take another shock like that…”

Rex gave his funny-looking stache a tug.

“That is a hard *no*, I presume?”

“No chance.”

“Shame, though I guess it can’t be helped. Wherever you may end, I hope your strength will be appreciated.”

“I have a feeling that might end up being the case. I just recently found out I was a *badass*.”

Ejrica kept her smile aimed at Dani. Miste could feel the thread of warmth connecting the two.

Ooh… I see how it is…! Hihihi…

Dani tapped Rex on the shoulder.

“Hey, how about me? I was also pretty crafty back then, right? Where’s my invitation to join?”

“Sorry, I believe we have no use for a kid with pockets full of toys. What we need is real strength.”

Dani’s ego crumbled into brittle little pieces in the blink of an eye. The boy fell down on his knees to pick up the scattered shards.

“…That was quite savage, right, Zeri?”

“Yeah, he got absolutely brutalized!”

The wooden clock on the tavern wall, beautifully crafted by young hands, sent out a tiny red bird to chirp out the time. The moment of departure was drawing close.

* * *

The streets of Powderberg were windy as ever. Due to the artificial climate system once again being active, the ground was free of snow and squeaky dry. If one didn’t know any better, it would be hard to believe that the city resided atop the tallest mountain of Zirinia and was surrounded by fields of everfrost.

The sky above was flawlessly blue, the midday sun tickled Miste’s neck from above. The weather was perfect for basking.

The air at the bus station was cool and serenely silent as the girl waited for the motorbus to arrive. It would take her and her friends away from this city of technological marvels and

towards the dawn to follow, and the endless adventures to come.

Not too long and the bus had already arrived.

As Miste climbed aboard the vehicle, she laid a longing gaze for the alleyway leading for Snow Top Inn.

“Did you forget something, Miste?”

“Nah, just hoping… Forget it.”

The motorbus thundered forth, carrying Miste fast away from the warmth of the inn. Though it had been only a brief while, it felt like a part of her had been left there, just like a part of her would always reside in Akrelion.

Miste leaned to gaze out the window, the high-rise buildings and alleys of the city created a rhythmic carousel in front of her.

Then, suddenly, something came to break that monotone.

Two people emerged from one of the alleys. The duo began running by the side of the motorbus.

Miste slammed her cheek against the window to see them better.

Kalila and Albert!

The innkeeper waved at the bus while running, until she fell out of breath. She remained waving gleefully while the bus drew distant.

The young boy squeezed out all the strength his tiny body could muster to keep up with the bus. He was staring at Miste as he ran, all the while his lips formed silent words. Even with

the thick glass separating Miste from the world beyond, she could clearly hear Albert's words:

"*Big sis! Thank you for everything! I'll keep mom safe; I'll be strong like you! Next time we meet, I'll show you all the cool stuff I've built! Look forward to it!*"

Eventually, Albert couldn't keep up with the vehicle and began falling behind.

Miste kept smiling at the boy while giving him encouraging thumbs up. She hoped that her feelings – the part of her she had left behind to the warmth of Snow Top Inn – would reach Albert in full.

* * *

"I still don't smell it, Zeri."

"It's there, you just don't realize it cos you've gotten so used to the aroma of apples."

"False! If my hair truly smelled like apples, I'd spend all my days just sniffing at my own mane!"

"What's important is I notice it. Whenever I hold you close, I'm at home. The smell of apples always brings me back to Akrelion."

"So, I'm like a portable Akrelion?"

"Yep, just hop into my pocket."

"I'll just rather hold your hand, like so!"

"That works too."

"Hihihi…"

From afar, Dani's voice came bellowing over the full length of the train station.

"Hey! Lovebirds! The train's gonna leave you behind if you stay frolicking for too long!"

Miste and Zeriah stood on the cliff near Powderberg railway station. A breathtaking vista opened before their eyes: seemingly endless fields of untouched snow extending beyond the horizon.

Gazing towards the untrampled expanse got Miste thinking how much she truly had yet to experience. Her travels had only just begun, there was still a whole world for her to see… and she was most definitely going to see it all.

"Zeri, I feel so pumped, I'm about to burst!"

"I feel it too, you're squeezing my hand pretty tight!"

Miste lifted her right hand over the horizon. She gazed at the spectacular piece of alaxdrite on the back of her hand, the home of her partner astra, Yggdrazil.

"I'll definitely get to the bottom of this. Someday, Yggdrazil will be free! If I travel the world, I'm sure to find the answer to this mystery eventually."

"I have no doubt about it."

Miste turned to face Zeriah. She saw herself reflected from the clear lime-green in Zeriah's eyes. Miste Gauntlett, the same girl who had departed on her first adventure a week or so ago. Just a simple country bumpkin, a bumbling tinkerer, with a mismatched pair of blue and purple eyes…

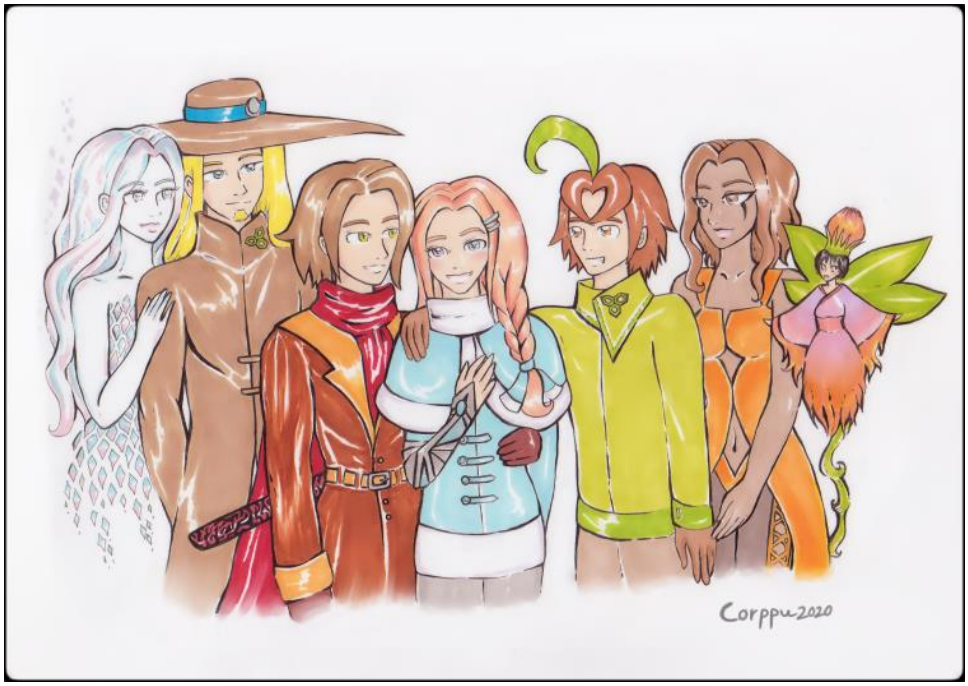
"Zeri, let's go have another adventure together!"

“Of course, we have so much to experience!”

The couple walked for the train hand in hand – with Dani, Reiram and Ejrica already waiting for them.

Seeing the smiling faces of dear travel companions greeting her gave Miste the sense that right here, right at this point in time, was the only place she wanted to be.

The passing week or so had truly been the bestest time in this young girl’s life! Or at least, the best time in her life *so far*…



BOOK II: DRYING INK

VERSE #24: FRESH WINDS

If there was one truth that Miste had learned in her seventeen years, it was that apples were the yummiest treat in existence! Juicy and crunchy, with the perfect balance between sweet and tangy. A taste of the fruits’ humble nuance would always bring

the girl closer to her hometown, Akrelion, filling her with warm and fuzzy giddiness.

Right now, the aroma of warm caramel and fruit wafting from the hallway of the train was irresistible. Miste jumped from her seat and dashed out of the cabin. In her rush, she ended up skidding across the floor and slamming against the hallway window. At the far end of the hallway, Miste caught her prey in her sights: a cart filled to the brim with all sorts of goodies.

Miste strutted to meet the slightly-flustered vendor lady.

“The smell was so good, I just couldn’t resist! I’ll take a bunch of those caramel apples, please!”

“Uhm… Yes, certainly.”

After making her purchase, Miste returned to the cabin. Her satisfied humming filled the room, along the scent of fresh and sticky caramel. She parked her butt back on the bench, between the two boys whom she shared her travels with, and offered her hands filled with skewered apples on either side.

“Here you go, guys! It’s my treat!”

The taller of the two boys, Zeriah, picked one of the apples from Miste. His lime-green eyes beamed loving thanks to the girl.

“Haha! Weren’t you in a grand hurry! I thought for a moment that the lunch couldn’t come to an agreement with your stomach or something.”

“I just wanted to make sure they didn’t run out of apples.”

The other boy – a more *boyish* character, with a peculiar green plume sticking from his messy hairdo – Dani, reached out for his own share.

“Heh, Mystic-M takes no chances when it comes to apples.”

“You know it!”

Zeriah and Dani munched their treats with gusto.

Miste leaned from her seat to offer an apple to Reiram, the elder Adventurer sitting on the other side of the cabin. The man’s stern gaze was glued to the window.

“I got enough for everyone, Reiram.”

“I’ll pass.”

Miste’s face twisted into a taunting pout. She had known Reiram for only a short while, but long enough to be already used to his overly abrasive demeanor, especially when people around him tried offering him kindness. His grumpiness was largely a front, a stone wall set up to hide his truly caring nature.

Luckily for Miste, over the years, she had developed a certain knack for handling barricades made of stone; in situations like these, persistence was always the key.

“Come on, Reiram! No need to be coy.”

After a while of drilling the man on the cheek with the caramelized apple, Miste managed to crack the stone, leaving Reiram to grunt under his breath.

“…Fine… thank you…”

Reiram took the apple while bowing his head in a sardonically courteous way.

Beside the man, a cloud of iridescent dust suddenly scattered out of nothingness. The tiny particles formed the silhouette of a woman. The image sharpened in an abrupt flash of silver,

revealing a lady dressed in a crystalline gown sitting next to Reiram.

The woman, Freyja, a member of the race of mythical creatures known as *astra,* turned her gaze to Reiram. Warmth and eternal vigor pulsated in her smiling expression.

“Reiram, you could occasionally try simply going with the flow from the start, rather than setting up the whole *grumpy-grump* act first.”

Reiram was about to answer the lady astra, but decided to cut himself short by shoving his mouth full of apple instead. Against Freyja – a spectral woman who lived inside his body, with their souls stitched together for all eternity, someone who had blazed trails alongside the man long enough to truly know him better than anyone – verbal jousting in the open would be rather pointless. It was a gracefully accepted defeat on Reiram’s part.

Freyja’s ethereal gleam painted the cabin with sparkling colors. She addressed the rest of the group with a wink.

“A little refreshment on a long trip never hurt anyone. Thank you, Miste.”

Miste’s humming grin was sweetened by a dash of red pulsing on her cheeks.

“I wanna share all the best things in life with all you guys!”

A symphony of satisfying crunches filled the cabin as the four travelers sampled their caramel apples.

“Mmmh… My mouth is melting from happiness…!”

“Apples are the royalty of fruit… now with a sweet golden-brown cloak… quite fitting.”

“These are awesome, thanks a ton, Mystic-M!”

“It is a rather modest yet refined taste indeed.”

Miste was still holding one extra apple. Zeriah aimed a snarky grin at the girl.

“Careful there, Miste, too much of melting your mouth and you’ll find it drooping to the floor.”

“Ha–Ha! It’s not for me, Zeri. I said I wanted everyone to have a taste. This one’s for Ejrica.”

Miste finished her own apple with a hasty nibble. The girl bounced for the window of the cabin and slid it open. A whipping breath of cool air filled the room.

As Miste leaned to peek out the window, Zeriah caught hold of her jacket. Miste turned around in surprise and found the boy smirking at her with jokey gleam.

“Don’t mind me, just making sure you won’t end up face first on the tracks.”

“Always keeping me out of trouble.”

“Uh-huh.”

Outside, the rush of wind mixed with the constant *to-thonk, to-thonk* of the train bouncing along the tracks to create a marching travel song. The massive steppe that reached beyond the horizon was like a green ocean of dancing grass, dotted with islands of enormous flowers blooming in every color imaginable. With their sharp and lean petals casting long shadows over the plains, and their thick stalks curving and twisting around each other, the flowers were like rugged trees, ancient, rooted deep down to the very essence of the land. Such

mighty yet beautiful flora was unlike anything Miste had ever seen.

As the train kept thundering through the fields of wonder, the warm summer breeze caught Miste's braided hair to whip and weave over her shoulder. The afternoon sun beaming from the cloudless sky made her squint her eyes just the teensiest bit.

Miste peered towards the roof of the train.

"Ejrica!?"

For a moment, it seemed like Miste's holler got lost to the winds.

Then, a woman with peculiar tattoos framing her eyes emerged to kneel over the edge of the roof. She stared back at Miste with her ink-filled gaze. Ejrica Nekaro, a dark and exotic beauty from the land of Serestria, a masterful martial artist, and a lady shrouded in deep mystery.

The gang had crossed paths with Ejrica at the city of Powderberg. The exotic lady had come there in hopes of training her martial arts mastery among the harsh and frozen environment at the highest peak of Maryam Mountains. Dani had been the first to meet Ejrica, when she had ended up rescuing the boy from the clutches of a hungry ivory-fang tiger. Afterwards, Ejrica had valiantly thrown herself into further danger and joined the group on their quest to apprehend a dangerous criminal and save the city of Powderberg from a dastardly conspiracy. In the end, Ejrica's assistance – like everyone else in the group – had been invaluable towards the success of their mission. Once the dust had settled and the group was about to be on their way, Ejrica had suddenly sprung up with the idea to join them on their travels. The group was currently headed towards Magna Crux, the capital of the

Kingdom of Zirinia, so that Miste, Zeriah and Ejrica could take part in the Adventurer trial. Completing the trial would gain them membership to Hex Nova, the venerable Guild of Adventurers – alongside the veteran members Reiram and Dani.

For the entirety of the train trip thus far – two days and counting – Ejrica had insisted on traveling atop the roof of the train. She refused to enter the locomotive for any reason; not to sleep, not to eat, nor to relieve herself. Only when the train made brief stops at the towns along the way, would Ejrica hop down from the roof to stretch her limbs for a moment. And it wasn't like Ejrica was freeloading or such, she had paid for her ticket same as everyone else.

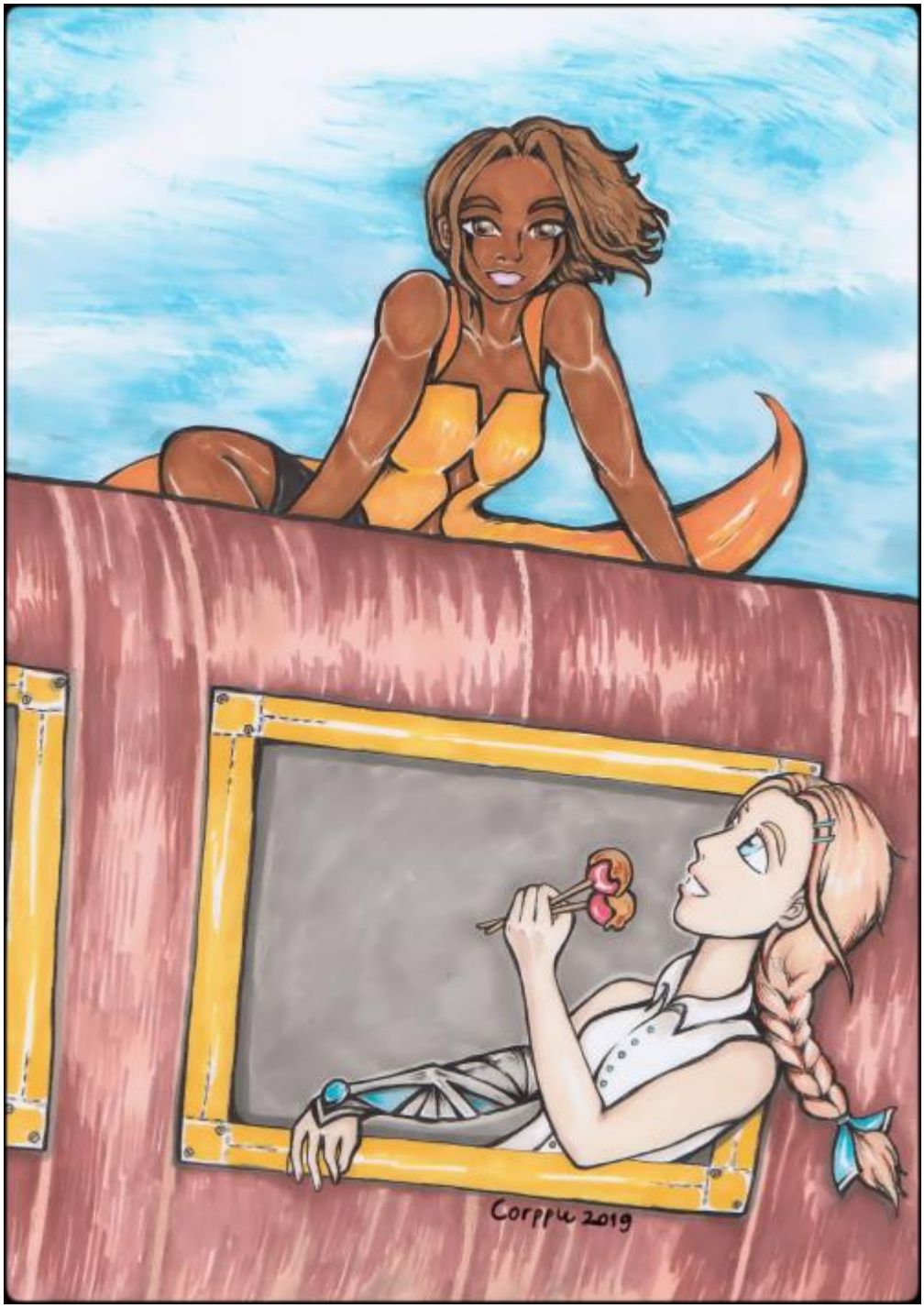
Miste had come to assume that this was simply another way for the martial artist to temper her spirit. This was unfortunate, since Miste had been secretly hoping that the trip would offer a chance for her and Ejrica to get better acquainted. Miste had never met anyone from Serestria before, nor had she ever met any girl so close to her own age and yet exuding such unabashed poise and maturity. So much of Ejrica remained hidden from all but herself, it made the part of Miste that thirsted for knowledge, and for new and exciting experiences, to tickle like crazy. It was an unbearable itch for the young and adventurous girl.

The wind whipped a loose spiral of hair to flutter over Ejrica's forehead. She brushed the stray lock behind her ear while gazing down at Miste askingly.

"Is something the matter?"

Upon a brief listen, it would be hard to believe that Ejrica wasn't a native speaker of Miste's language, for such steely clearness resounded from each of her words. On a further analysis though, one could notice that the way the exotic woman flicked and clicked her tongue just perfectly on every syllable was almost too clean to be natural. She spoke no dialect, and her calm and clear delivery was like that of a literature teacher.

"Nah, everything is peachy, as usual. I just scored some awesome caramel apples and I wanted everyone to have a taste! Here ya go!"



The space between the two young ladies was too long to simply hand over something. Luckily, Miste had it covered.

Miste focused her mind and tapped into the power of Yggdrazil, her partner astra. The enigmatic creature lived inside a piece of blue alaxdrite embedded on a steel gauntlet, which Miste always carried around her right arm. The astra granted Miste

the ability to create solid objects from the energy within her soul; her own life force.

Miste summoned her soul to gush outward, climbing up her arm, and bubbling forth via the blue gem. A stream of tiny azure particles materialized from within. The mosaic of energy formed into the shape of an enormous fist around Miste's gauntlet.

The creation of the energy construct happened in an eyeblink. Miste gave the alaxdrite on the back of her hand – or rather Yggdrazil – a confident smile. Miste felt quite pleased in herself, for the lag between her activating Yggdrazil's power and the desired shape manifesting had significantly reduced since the first time she had used the ability. Day by day, she was building a stronger affinity with the astra.

Miste reached for the roof of the train with her augmented hand of azure energy while pinching the caramel apple gracefully between her fingers.

Ejrica seemed genuinely astonished. Not for the display of supernatural abilities – after all, she herself was an Astral Bearer too – but rather by the offering of sweets delivered to her up on the roof.

"For… *me*?"

"Yeah! It's already been a while since the last stop, so I figured you could use something tasty to cheer up your day."

Ejrica took the apple in her hand, eyeing the treat while a swirl of dark ink danced within her stern gaze.

"Thank you."

The crunchy chomp that Ejrica took out of the apple resounded with such savor that Miste could practically taste it herself. Seeing her gift hitting the spot made Miste hum with satisfaction.

Miste dissolved her energy fist; the construct shattered into thousands of tiny shards of sparkling azure, each one crumbling into nothingness.

“So, uhm… how’s it going on your end, Ejrica?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean like, isn’t it tiring to just sit up there all alone? We still have a couple more days till we get to the Capital, and we got plenty of spare room here. It would be fun if you joined us.”

“Thank you for the sentiment, but I’m quite content with the current arrangement–”

“Speak for yourself, Ejrica!!”

A shrill voice suddenly cut between Ejrica’s line.

With cheeks of powdery white and eyes gleaming with the essence of mischief, a tiny girl peeked over the edge of the roof beside Ejrica. The sudden arrival was Sakuya, the partner astra of the exotic lady, taking the form of an ethereal girl.

Sakuya threw a quick scowl at Ejrica before leaping off the roof. Her fluttery dress of bright pink and warm orange glistened in the sun as she moved to hover alongside the rolling locomotive, managing to keep the pace effortlessly.

Sakuya leaned to rest playfully over Miste’s shoulder while flashing her a giddy smile – for an astra, this was simply a matter of moving the placement of their *projection*, an image of

themselves. The true essence of an astra always resided inside their partner, engraved to their soul as it were.

“Some folks may be fine just sitting all alone – still like a statue, serene like a dune, and silent like a rock – but to some of us, hear that Ejrica, to *some* of us, nothing to do and no one to talk with is soooo booooring!!”

Ejrica gave her partner astra a dismissive look.

“I’m sorry I’m boring you, Sakuya.”

“No, you’re not sorry – I know you aren’t, hmpf! It’s all par for the course by this point, I’m used to it.”

Sakuya fluttered behind Miste’s neck and settled to lean on her other shoulder. The tiny astra gave the girl a jesting poke on the cheek.

“Thanks for popping out to see us, Miste.”

“It’s nothing. I’m glad to see you doing well.”

“Ah, you just can’t imagine how it gets sometimes; it’s so empty, and cold, and deserted inside Ejrica. She calls it meditating, but I call it booo–ooo–oooring!”

Sakuya drooped her gaze towards Ejrica while drooping over Miste’s shoulder, while the girl herself drooped out from the window.

Ejrica’s response was a pronounced sigh.

“Be patient, Sakuya. We’ll reach Magna Crux in only a few more days. I assume you won’t be bored anymore then.”

“Yea, that’s fine and all, though I say it won’t be *only* a few more days, but rather *still* a few more days!”

Sakuya wilted even lazier over Miste's shoulder whilst putting on a pouty frown.

"Boo… You get it, right Miste? Life is supposed to be about excitement and action, and about things that are new and fun, y'know."

"Yeah, admittedly, I'm a bit impatient too. I've dreamed of becoming a real Adventurer for so long, and now my dream is so close I can already taste it, just makes me want to burst out and scream from joy! But, at the same time, these moments that I share with all you guys are precious to me, no matter what happens. Simply having all of you near makes me feel all warm and relaxed."

Miste peeked back inside the cabin through the window. Zeriah and Dani returned her gaze with nodding smiles. Reiram had his face covered by the wide brim of his hat – the elder Adventurer returned Miste's sentiment with a vaguely approving wave of his hand.

Sakuya rubbed her cheek in ponder.

"Hmm, that's a nice notion and all, though I had something else in mind…"

The tiny astra crept closer to Miste's ear while giggling deviously.

"I think it would do Ejrica good to mingle a bit more, especially with Dani, after all, Ejrica is the same age as him… it might help her unwind from time to time… if you know what I'm getting at…"

"Uhm… yea… I think I do…"

Suddenly, Miste felt Ejrica's murderous gaze beaming down from the roof, harsher than any rays of the sun ever could.

Sakuya turned to face Ejrica with a teasing grin. Although the astra had been whispering, the exotic woman atop the train had heard every word loud and clear. Each astra and their Bearer were linked in mind and soul.

"Did someone say my name?"

Dani leaned through the window and peered for the roof of the train. The cabin's limited window space became a rather tight squeeze for two people.

"Did you need anything from me, Ejrica?"

Ejrica held her burning leer focused squarely on Sakuya.

"No, Dani, I'm absolutely certain that no one said any such thing. Right, Sakuya?"

The tiny astra basking under her partner's gaze fluttered around Dani's head while throwing the boy a giggly grin.

"Teehee, you must've heard wrong. I was saying that a bit of *honey* would do Ejrica good, y'know, help her relax from time to time, rather than a bit of *Dani*."

Ejrica's suppressed irritation towards Sakuya made the dark ink in her eyes simmer like a kettleful of oil.

Miste decided to remain quiet, so as to not make Ejrica boil over.

Back in Powderberg, Dani had gone to almost obsessive lengths to find Ejrica again when the elusive woman had suddenly disappeared after helping Dani out of trouble. Anyone could see that Dani was unabashedly smitten by the exotic beauty, it was

clear in every look he gave her, his revere gushing through his eyes, or perhaps something even deeper than mere revere…

As for Ejrica, Miste couldn't be quite certain what she thought of the young Adventurer boy. At the very least, Miste knew that Ejrica respected Dani as a dear friend.

Dani slapped himself on the forehead jokingly, returning Sakuya's beaming grin.

"Ah, okay, sorry, yea, I must've misheard. But you're right, some first-class honey does wonders for the body and soul, not to mention it's delicious to boot! Funny you should mention it, as luck would have it, the next town on our way is a true honey-land."

Miste's interest was piqued by Dani's rather cryptic statement.

"How so, Dani?"

"Heh, just wait and you'll see, Mystic-M. Let's just say that we'll be able to get more than our fill of the stuff."

Dani's crafty smirk was like someone dangling a gift-wrapped box right in front of Miste.

Dani craned his neck sharply up to fish for Ejrica's gaze.

"We can get some honey for the road too if you'd like, Ejrica."

Ejrica's lips twitched into a smile as she was about to say something, though she snappily shut herself up by biting down on her lip. Her eyes darted around haphazardly, searching for some unknown object in the distance, finally settling on the train tracks, her gaze slightly averted from the people below her.

“Yes, let us do so. Although, that is a conversation for a time yet in the future.”

Ejrica retreated from the edge of the roof.

“Thank you for the apple, Miste, it was quite fulfilling. Let’s talk more later.”

The exotic lady moved swiftly away from view. Sakuya let out a grumping moan.

“Boo… no fun at all… oh well, if that’s the way she wants it, then fine. It was nice chatting, even if it was brief. See you guys later.”

The tiny astra graced Miste and Dani with a final sunny smile, before drawing a loop through the air and diving within the arc formed by the hem of her flowing dress. As the tail of the garment followed Sakuya through the loop, the astra vanished into thin air. Her voice remained chiming a soft echo alongside the rattling of the train tracks.

“Oh, and look out for that tree.”

“Tree?”

“What tree?”

Miste and Dani turned to peer towards the front of the train. Closing in fast, the train was about to pass through a thick grove of the enormous tree-like flowers that dotted the fields around them. The wall of flora grew only a couple of inches away from the train tracks – a rather tight fit for anyone unfortunate enough to be drooping outwards from, say, a window of one of the cabins.

“Eep!!”

A sudden yank on both Miste and Dani's collars pulled the duo back inside the cabin, just as the train dived inside the grove of flowers. The cabin fell dim as the flora whooshing past outside the window blocked the sun.

Miste fell in Zeriah's arms, while Dani ended up flying against the door of the cabin.

"You alright, Miste?"

"I'm peachy, thanks to you, Zeri!"

Dani rose to stand, clonking his head on the doorknob on his way up.

"Ouch… I'm fine too, thanks Big-Z."

Reiram adjusted his lounging posture while grumbling under his breath.

"Tch, a bunch of dunces…"

* * *

The locomotive cleared through the forest of flowers in a matter of minutes, and the endless steppe of swaying grass once more appeared to surround the travelers. As Miste leaned out of the window to have a peek towards the front of the train, the group's next destination revealed itself. From beyond the horizon, a perfectly flat, boxlike mountainside rose towards the skies. As the monument of rusty-red rock came to full focus, Miste noticed that the train tracks were leading towards a thin crevice in the wall. Little by little, while the train thundered towards the mountain, the grasslands grew withered and coarse, replaced by dry earth full of crackles. Miste was forced to close the window of the cabin as the rush through the drylands lifted a continuous stream of dust to dance on either

side of the train. The girl could only hope Ejrica was doing fine up on the roof, though admittedly, the exotic lady had proven herself capable of bearing almost any kind of storm.

Not long after the scenery had changed from the lush fields of grass into the thirst-titillating drylands, the train rolled inside the crevice at the side of the rock structure, now revealed to be in fact a half-a-kilometer-wide valley. Soon, the clonking of the train against the tracks simmered down, screeching to a halt at a small station of red-tiled stone.

The group had arrived at *Pakel*, a small village hidden inside the valley of red stone. The town served as little more than a train outpost near the eastern coast of Zirinia on the path towards Magna Crux.

The entire town was built as a single street alongside the train tracks, leading towards the depths of the valley before disappearing beyond a sharply winding corner. Each of the perfectly cubic houses – made from the same red stone as the terrain – were equal in size, with two windows and a door placed squarely at the middle, each of them facing towards the tracks.

The train echoed with the conductor's announcement, promising a half-hour breather before departure.

As the group stepped onto the platform for a quick stretch-of-leg, the stale and dry air made everyone wince in unison; there was not even the slightest hint of the refreshing breeze from earlier. The air was filled with invisible squiggly lines rising from the burning-hot tiles of the station. The sun had positioned itself directly over the valley. The scorching light fell down so

intensely that one could nearly feel each individual ray, as if the whole town was placed under an enormous magnifying glass.

Miste slogged underneath the shade of a small pentice at the far end of the platform, whilst flapping her jacket like a fledgling bird desperately trying to fly.

“Soooo hoooot…!”

The shade was barely an improvement. Miste leaned to rest against a guardrail that extended the entirety of the platform. Even the metal in the shade felt warm against her bum. Zeriah joined her shortly after. The boy yanked his trademark red scarf from around his neck while wiping his forehead off sweat.

“Summers are hot back in Akrelion too, but this is just insane! Is it like this everywhere towards the south?”

Dani ran towards the couple and past Reiram while snatching the elder Adventurer’s hat from his head.

“Nah, Pakel is its own beast. It’s basically always like this: sizzling hot in the summer, though nice and cozy cool during the winter.”

Dani joined Miste and Zeriah under the shade, giving himself a nice fanning with Reiram’s hat. Reiram caught up to his mischievous colleague soon after, and promptly bonked him on the head.

“Touch my hat again and I’ll arrange you a *nice and cozy cool* resting place…”

“Waah, you’re being scary, Rei-Rei!”

Another whack from Reiram made Dani squat down while rubbing his numbed-out head.

Reiram placed his hat to rest softly over his golden mane. The angle of his headpiece was always tipped downward, so as to hide his face from people around him. He dropped his trench coat from his shoulders and folded the garment to rest over his arm. Caring little for the cooling shadows, Reiram paced closer to the platform's exit and gazed at the village of red stone. He seemed to be deep in thought.

Miste tried searching for something, anything, that might've caught the attention of the elder Adventurer. The town of Pakel felt serene, unassuming and idyllic. Only a scarce few people were pacing about with calm and jolly steps. There was zero rush. Nothing could ever disturb the peace of this tiny pocket community.

Mere couple days prior, the group had been over at the highest and coldest reaches of the Kingdom of Zirinia, the city of Powderberg – a metropolis of technological growth, with busy streets, hundreds of skyscrapers piercing the heavens, and a sense of progress, though admittedly, also a sense of urgency encompassing the entire city.

Such juxtaposition, a chance to visit drastically different locals, to see all this world had to offer, gave Miste a sense of deep satisfaction; this was exactly why she had always dreamed of becoming an Adventurer.

"Pakel seems like a nice town, doesn't it, Reiram?"

"Yes. Secluded, tranquil, and most importantly *quiet*."

"Somehow I get the feeling like a part of that was aimed as a hint?"

"Take it as you please…"

Miste decided to leave Reiram to his thoughts, whatever they may have been.

“So, Dani, you said that Pakel is nice and cool in the winter – have you visited here often?”

“Yeah, when I was little, my dad used to take me and Marline on trips around Zirinia.”

“That sounds awesome, traveling the world with your family! I hope I get to meet your sister soon.”

“You guys will get the chance as soon as we get to Magna Crux. I’m sure Marline will be thrilled to meet all of you. Man, feels like it’s been ages since I last visited the Capital, I have so much to tell her.”

A shiver slithered through Reiram.

“What’s wrong, Rei-Rei?”

Zeriah threw a mocking scowl at the elder Adventurer’s back.

“I bet he was just imagining two of you in the same room, Dani.”

“Oh Ha-Ha! Nice one, Big-Z! Though there’s no need for worry, Rei-Rei, my big sis is much sweeter than I am. I think you two will get along just fine.”

Reiram sent Dani a dismissive wave over his shoulder.

Zeriah peered for the townscape with query eyes.

“So, what’s so special about this place that’s worth a visit?”

“Well, *honey* of course! What else? Remember those huge flowers a while back? The local hive of *pebble bees* collects their nectar to make their honey. Throughout the ages, the villagers here have formed a symbiotic relationship with the bees; the people keep the fields safe from any large herbivores that would

munch on the flowers, as well as any predators eager to snack on the bees themselves. In exchange, the bees allow the villagers to collect part of their honey. It's actually a unique thing to come across in the whole of Zirinia – a shared harvest between animals and men. The honey is of the finest quality too, Pakel makes nearly all of its income by distributing the stuff throughout the Kingdom."

"Ooh, that's awesome! Guess this town is quite unique, right Zeri?"

"That is actually pretty impressive. By just looking at the place, I would've never guessed there was so much going on."

"You know what they say about big things and small packages and all that stuff, hehehe!"

Something caught Dani's attention on the roof of the train. Ejrica was sitting relaxed by the edge of the roof, with one of her legs hanging in the air. She had lifted her face towards the sun, with her eyes closed and her lips widened in euphoric gleam; the exotic beauty was like a blooming flower, hungry to embrace the warm gift of life beaming down from the heavens.

"Yo! Ejrica!"

The woman took a break from her sunbathing and hopped down to the platform. She arrived to meet the group with a brisk and springy stride, stopping just outside the cool shade of the pentice.

"Hello, everyone."

Miste couldn't help but fix her focus on the exotic lady's lack of footwear. Wherever Ejrica went, she was always barefoot, even when marching through the frozen peaks of Maryam

Mountains. At the moment, the red tiling of the train platform was visibly sizzling, and yet to Ejrica it was seemingly unnoticeable. Nothing could break her calm. She was truly a hardened traveler.

“You sure you’re okay just standing there? Isn’t it getting a bit hot?”

“I’m quite fine. The warmth of midsummer sun always feels so soothing. The greatest of celestial bodies graces us with its grandest beams as it visits us so close once a year. It feels… homey.”

Miste didn’t know much about Ejrica’s homeland of *Serestria*. All she could tell off the top of her head was that the Kingdom resided far across the continent, in the middle of *Terasu Desert*, an area most definitely not a stranger to the sun’s scorching might.

The idea that a simple thing like the rays of the sun could make a person feel closer to home made Miste smile.

I guess everyone has something that connects them with home; like apples, or the sun, or a fond memory…

Dani took a pronounced step closer to the exotic beauty.

“By the by, Ejrica, we were just talking about honey. I was thinking of getting some for the road; do you prefer yours crystallized or runny?”

“Oh no, Dani, you don’t have to bother because of me. That thing with Sakuya earlier, she was just messing around, trying to be clever, you know how she is.”

“O-——kay? Well, anyways, I was gonna get some regardless. I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

Dani dashed towards the not-hustle and none-bustle of the town, and for a small market area near the train station.

Although the exact definition of a *jiffy* would most likely be an ever-elusive mystery to mankind, Dani surely arrived back rather quickly. A clatter of glass jars accompanied the gleeful boy's stride. The various pouches and holsters decorating Dani's attire from chest to knees were filled to the brim with packs of honey. As was normal for Dani, even with his added baggage of amber delicacies, his steps were light and bouncy. His sunny grin matched the sweltering weather.

"I was sure to get enough honey to last us at least… well, at the very least till the Capital. Just give me a shout if you fancy a taste, Ejrica."

"Yes, I'll be sure to do that."

Exactly how Dani was imagining on using up all that honey before reaching the Capital was a mystery… maybe best left as such.

"And I got something else too, for all you guys!"

Dani pulled out a long, tightly-wrapped paper package from his quiver – the last place in his attire with extra room still remaining. A succulent whiff of smoky meat grilled over sizzling embers filled the air as Dani opened the wrapping. Inside was a bundle of golden-brown strips of meat skewered on sticks.

"It's the specialty of Pakel. Go on guys, get it while it's still hot!"

Everyone picked up a share of the meat. The sweet aroma wafting from the light and tender piece of exotic meat was unlike anything Miste had come across.

“Looks yummy, what is this?”

“Roasted pebble bee larva.”

The entire group froze in place and stared at the lumps of meat. The way Dani spoke was as if the idea of eating enormous bugs was perfectly normal.

Zeriah ogled at his share with skepticism tugging on his brow.

“Yeah… I’m actually on a *none-larva diet*…”

“Come on, Big-Z, don’t let the sound of it fool ya, it’s actually quite the treat.”

Reiram was the first to bite in. His nonchalant savoring encouraged others to give the meat a try as well.

Ejrica took a tiny nibble of the larva.

“Hmm… you Zirinians sure have some peculiar dishes.”

“Is it good, Ejrica?”

“An acquired taste, I’m sure. I myself rather enjoy it. You should have a taste for yourselves.”

Miste and Zeriah shared a supportive look with each other.

“Well, here goes…”

“It’s a local treat after all…”

The initial bite felt crunchy, followed by the extremely tender and sweet meat spewing its juices to simmer over the tongue. The meat had a touch of gaminess, complementing its fluffy texture rather uniquely.

“This is…”

“It’s like honey glazed boar…”

“Yeah, but the texture is so light, almost like fish…”

The two youths from a secluded town residing at the far corner of the Kingdom had never in their lives tasted such a quirky mix of flavors. There were no extra spices added, the complex aroma was all due to the meat’s natural juices.

“It’s awesome!!”

Both Miste and Zeriah exclaimed their judgement in unison.

Dani smiled at his friends, as if saying *I told ya so*!

“Glad you guys like it.”

“So, how do they get their hands on this stuff, anyway? I can’t imagine the bees being too happy about people taking their young.”

“Actually on the contrary, Big-Z, it’s sorta part of that symbiotic relationship that the local folk have with the bees. You see, the pebble bees operate on a kind of hivemind, with their queen linking them all together. Only little is known about the specifics of their communication, but that’s beside the point. As the hive grows, the bees keep a tight tally of the number of drones that live in the community. The queen bee gives birth to numerous drone larva, all of which are kept in hibernation from birth. The drones are awakened from slumber if the number of active bees in the hive drops too low, due to predators or disease. Because the local hive is thriving, most of the slumbering drones reach their *expiration date* before getting the chance to awaken. The bees are rather pleased that the people of the village come to harvest the excess larva away – after all, they are more useful that way, as tasty treats!”

“That’s amazing! You sure know your stuff, Dani.”

“Hey, y’know, one can only try.”

Dani took a taste of his own share. An approving nod accompanied his savoring – the taste was just as he remembered.

“I recall how dad used to buy me and my sis treats when we stopped by here. Now I can do the same for you guys. Let’s call it a welcome gift from a senior Adventurer, seeing as you guys will all be joining me and Rei-Rei in Hex Nova’s ranks soon.”

“There you go again, getting ahead of yourself, these three still have the trial to clear.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart, Rei-Rei. You’ve seen what they can do. I say the trial will be a walk in the park for them.”

“Even so, they shouldn’t get too confident. It’s better to be prepared for anything.”

Miste pointed at Reiram with her skewered larva.

“We’ve already been through all kinds of challenges, and we’ll all do awesomely at the trial too! Have faith in us!”

“It’s not faith that carries you through. It’s skill and strength.”

Zeriah tapped the handle of his sword with confidence.

“If that’s what’s required, I think we’ll do just fine.”

“I said *skill* and *strength*, not misguided *faith* in skill and strength.”

“Tch… just you wait…”

Miste slipped her fingers to cradle Zeriah’s hand.

“I think it’s sweet of Reiram to worry so much about us.”

“Hmm, he could consider illustrating it in other ways than just grumping all the time.”

“I am not grumping!!”

Miste and Zeriah shared a snicker over the elder Adventurer’s rattled yelp.

Dani nudged to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ejrica.

“Don’t mind Rei-Rei, I for one believe in you 100%.”

“I’m rather inclined to agree with Reiram. Faith doesn’t amount to much if you don’t possess the skills needed.”

The exotic woman’s gaze remained strictly away from the boy. Getting so decisively brushed aside made Dani slump down like a wet blanket.

Just then, a raspy screech echoed over the valley. A heavy swoosh of wind moved closer to the village from the south. The culprit revealed itself in the form of an enormous bird, or rather a winged lizard of blue and green feather coating. It flew over the valley and stopped to perch high atop the wall.

The creature peered down at the village while snappily moving its long neck from side to side. Its curved beak opened to unleash another earsplitting screech.

The heavy swoosh of air returned tenfold. A flock of the creature’s kin appeared from beyond the horizon and settled to gaze at the village from either side of the valley. The creatures’ bright plumes formed a chain of colorful banners to frame the town of Pakel. The lizards remained perfectly quiet, simply observing.

“What are they, Dani?”

“*Honey gliders*, a type of nomadic pterosaur. As their name would suggest, the honey of pebble bees is one of their favorite snacks.”

Dani gave his friends a calming wave.

“No need for alarm. They may look fierce, but they’ll soon be on their way.”

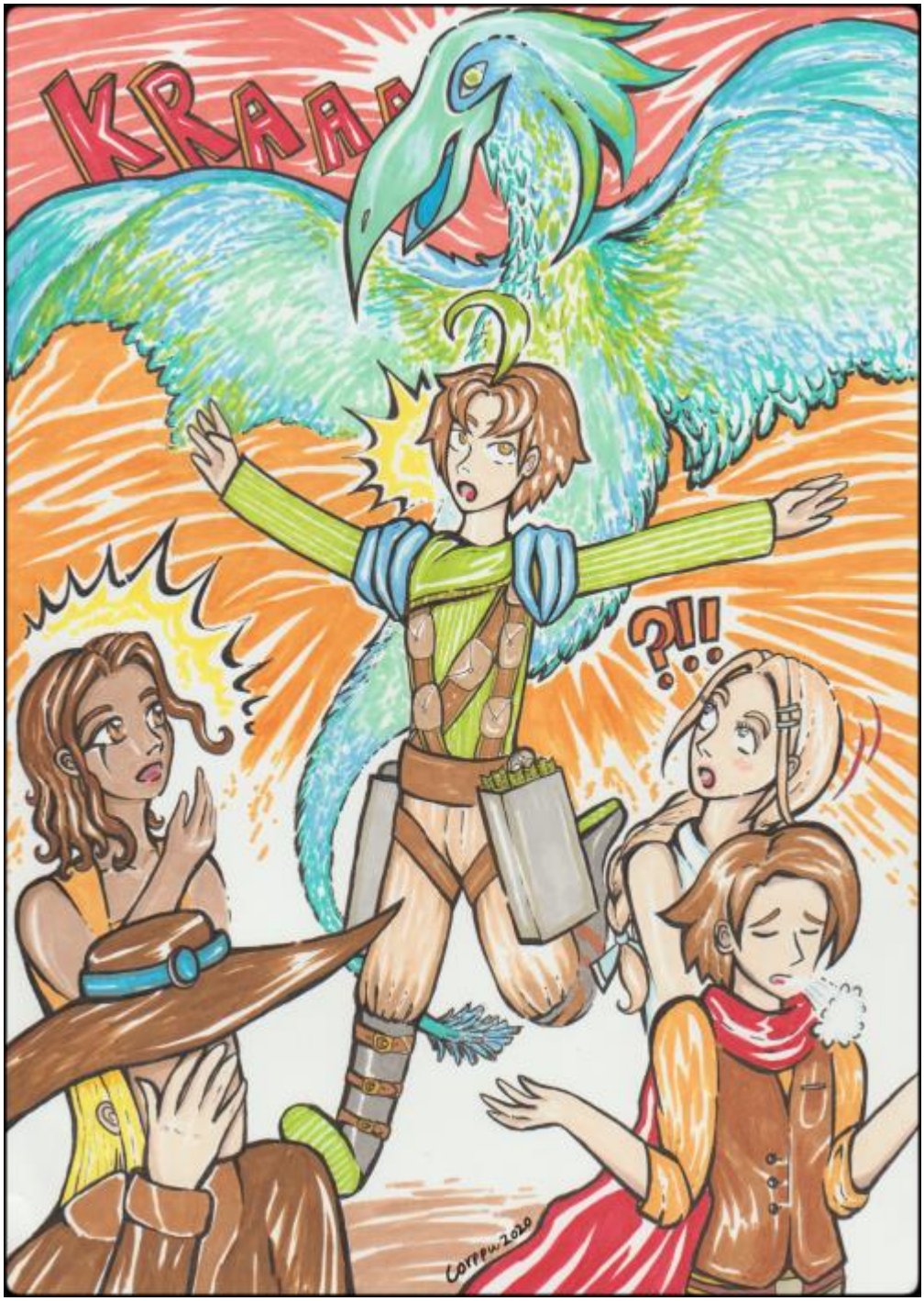
The leader of the pack of flying lizards let out yet another screech. It thrust its neck hungrily towards the valley, and Dani.

Dani glanced at the half-eaten roasted larva in his hand.

“Oh, no you don’t! This is *my* larva! Get your own munchies!”

The honey glider leapt off the ledge and took a fierce dive towards the village. Once the creature reached the floor of the valley, it spread its wings wide and turned to glide at an impressive speed along the ground. It reached the train platform before anyone could react. While blaring out another raspy screech, the speeding avian reached for Dani with its spread-out talons and grabbed the young Adventurer from his shoulders.

“No!! Dani!!”



A single sharp flap of its wings flung the feathery creature towards the skies and for the exit of the valley.

“Gaaaah!! Help!!”

Dani’s cry got muffled amidst the swishing of wind and a collection of triumphant screeches as the flock of lizards took to the skies to follow their leader. The creatures took the same

route as their leader, gliding along the floor of the valley and towards the exit.

As the creatures got close to the train platform, Miste leapt for the flock and managed to land clumsily over the tail of one of them. She was near to roll right off the creature, but managed to grab hold of the feathers covering the tip of its tail. Miste heard the first syllable of her name being called, quickly muffled by the wind whistling through her ears as the honey glider shot towards the sky with explosive might.

For a second or so, all of Miste's senses turned numb as she rose for the heavens along the creature. All she could do was hold on tight, even as the whipping air and the honey glider's irritation over its freeloading rider – manifested by the creature furiously shaking its tail – did their best to make the girl fall.

Dani…! Don't worry, I'm coming…!

The shaking softened as the honey glider flattened the angle of its flight, hovering along the winds like a leaf drifting down a tiny creek.

Miste climbed from the creature's tail to its back. She took a quick glimpse down – a mistake. The vast fields of green which the group had just traveled through were waiting for Miste hundreds of meters down. The vertigo made her nearly fall off. She slammed herself tightly against the back of her ride. The streams of air brushing her from all sides felt icy, like a constant barrage of thin blades caressing her skin.

Crap, this was stupid, what was I thinking…!? I didn't think…!

A careful peek past the honey glider's shoulder revealed the leader of the flock flying ahead, a dozen or so meters lower.

Dani was still hanging from the creature's talons while kicking and twitching.

"Let me go, you oversized quill-pen-stand!!"

It was reassuring to know that Dani was still alive and very much kicking, although maybe the notion of *letting go* wasn't the smartest one at the moment.

Miste heard a holler coming from behind her, vaguely resembling a call for her name. She turned her gaze past the wing of the honey glider to check. More of the flying lizards appeared to glide alongside the one Miste was riding. Zeriah was struggling to keep balance atop the creature closest to hers. Reiram and Ejrica had each captured their own rides and were gliding underneath Zeriah. Miste noticed Sakuya hanging over Ejrica's shoulder, a giddy smile decorating the face of the tiny astra.

"Wheeee! Now this is what I'm talking about! Faster! Faster!!"

"Sakuya, please… At least try to act like you're concerned about everyone's safety…"

Miste's ride rose higher along the winds, making her flinch tighter against the creature.

Not sure if I should say 'Yay, everyone's here!' or rather 'Oh no, everyone's in a pinch!'

The group was doing okay for the time being, but for how long would their tailwind last? Miste had been rash while jumping into action and chasing after Dani; she had no idea how to reach him, much less how to stop the honey gliders.

The flock took a sudden turn to the left, all the while diving sharply towards the green steppe below. Miste's strength

sapped away quickly while she clutched the honey glider's feathers for dear life. A harsh gust of wind lifted Miste off the creature's back and made her whip uncontrollably, draining her even faster.

Luckily, the dive soon softened into a low-hanging glide, a few dozen meters above the fields of grass.

Zooming past the oceans of swaying green and the islands of flourishing flora made Miste appreciate the vastness of the steppe in an entirely different way. There must've been only a chance few people who had ever traveled through the lands like this, and witnessed all its beauty from the skies. Were the situation a less dangerous one, Miste could've probably come to appreciate the experience further.

The leader of the honey glider flock – with Dani hanging from its talons – remained flying right in front of Miste's ride. The chief-glider was taking the convoy back towards the rusty-red mountainside. The creatures were heading inside another valley farther away from Pakel. Once they dove between the walls of rock, the flock lowered their altitude once more, skating just above the rocky floor of the valley.

Now if ever was the time for Miste to make her move.

She tapped into Yggdrazil's power while climbing to stand atop the honey glider. She thrust her right arm forth as her desired energy construct took shape. A pair of beautiful azure wings sprouted from the alaxdrite on the back of her hand. A single sharp flap of the wings launched Miste from the back of the honey glider, speeding towards the leader of the flock.

The wings didn't hold the capacity to fly – it was more like dashing through the air extremely fast. Miste lost altitude fast,

dropping too low to reach the leader of the flock. She zoomed right underneath Dani's twitching legs and reached the ground a few meters ahead of the lizard keeping him hostage. Miste turned around to face the honey glider, dissolving her azure wings. She hopped towards the lizard and grabbed hold of Dani's ankles as the creature flew past.

"Let him go!!"

The weight of two people proved to be too much for the honey glider. The lizard bobbed and weaved through the air while making desperate efforts to flap its wings in fury. In the end, the creature released its grip on Dani, and the chain of two youngsters fell to the ground. The disappointed lizard let out alarming screeches as it rose higher with haphazard flailing of its wings.

Miste helped Dani to stand.

"Are you okay?!"

"I am now… Thanks Mystic-M, you totally saved my neck!"

The rest of the honey gliders swooshed past the two youngsters; the storm generated by dozens of wings flapping made them fall over.

"Gaah!"

"Whoa!"

Zeriah, Reiram and Ejrica hopped down from their rides just as the flock zoomed after their leader towards the blue sky. The screeching of the lizards grew distant quickly, leaving the valley in a state of well-appreciated calm.

Zeriah rushed to meet Miste, patting and caressing her all over.

“Are you hurt?! Can you stand?!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m peachy, relax! Dani was the one in real danger here – that lizard was probably planning on snacking on him.”

Zeriah brought Miste close to his chest, stroking her hair gently.

“You were being reckless again.”

“I didn’t stop to think… I’m sorry. Don’t worry, everything’s alright now.”

Reiram and Ejrica, with Sakuya drooping over her shoulder, came to join their friends.

“Everything isn’t entirely *alright*. For one thing: we definitely missed our train.”

Dani swatted his attire clean of red dust.

“Sorry guys, it’s my fault. I’m moved that all you guys came to rescue me.”

Miste pulled away from Zeriah’s embrace to meet Dani’s gaze.

“Don’t be stupid, of course we came for you! We’re friends, and we will all be Adventurers soon, we’re supposed to stick together, right?!”

Reiram let out a condescending cackle.

“Friends maybe, but there really isn’t any kind of set rules for what Adventurers are *supposed* to do.”

No one was entirely sure how to respond to Reiram’s mildly ambiguous statement.

Sakuya broke the moment of silence by exclaiming her giddiness.

“Well, I don’t care what anyone says – that was sweet! It was about time we got to some action! Let’s do it again!”

Ejrica rubbed her forehead in embarrassment.

“Sakuya, please…”

The tiny astra’s innocent honesty made Miste laugh. She was quickly joined by Zeriah and Dani, then Ejrica. Even Reiram allowed a quick amused snort.

“Hihihi! That was a wild ride, we should totally do it again! I mean, isn’t it amazing? We just flew! I think that’s an experience we’ll always remember.”

A swarming buzzing noise resounded over the valley, like the wail of a massive turbine. Everyone’s attention was drawn upwards along the walls, to the topmost ledge of the valley. A collection of tiny tunnels was drilled inside the red stone. From within said holes, the buzzing echoed ever-louder, until the creatures responsible for the noise tumbled into view.

A cloud of jet-black and bright-orange stripes, hundreds of paper-thin wings flapping fast enough to make the air rumble like thunder, armed with countless stingers resembling daggers – a swarm of large bees the size of rabbits came exploding from their nest. The insects formed a canopy of fuzzy and striped bellies over the valley, hovering in place with their stingers aimed at the floor.

Zeriah stepped instinctively in front of Miste while reaching for the scabbard of his sword.

“I guess these are the much-talked pebble bees?”

“Right you are, Big-Z.”

“They look pretty peeved.”

“Usually they are quite docile. Those honey gliders flying past their nest must’ve riled them up something fierce.”

“Oh, great… so what now?”

One of the bees disengaged from the cloud and came zooming towards Zeriah. The swordsman turned a circular knob around the handle of his weapon, activating the unique feature of his instrument. The scabbard of the weapon held two identical blades, which could be both attached and detached from the handle with an intricate lock mechanism. Zeriah drew his weapon in dual-blade configuration and twirled it before him in a single theatrical motion.

The bee’s stinger collided with Zeriah’s sword; the impact made the swordsman flinch in place. Zeriah gave the stinger a hardy whack with the flat of his blade, sending the bee to pirouette through the air violently and crash against the rocky wall of the valley.

“Seems like they don’t appreciate us being here.”

“Yup, we should prolly run…”

“Then what are we still standing here for?!”

The gang headed for the exit of the valley, dashing away from the swarm of riled-up bees with everything they had. The insects gave chase while keeping their cloud-like formation above them. A small strike force of bees rained down from time to time to shoo the unwanted guests. The attacks weren’t aimed to be lethal, or at the very least not that well-aimed, as the sequence of strikes seemed to be scattered rather randomly.

Dani mixed his running with constant rolls and dashes from side to side, as the blunt of the attacks ended up flying at the unlucky guy.

“Everyone, just keep a close eye on your backs! The bees will drill at a straight line once they attack, so if we time our dodges carefully this will be easy…”

Ejrica dashed beside Dani from the right.

“Duck!”

The exotic lady waited for Dani to drop down on the ground before sweeping the air with a sharp roundhouse kick. The tip of her foot slammed against a bee just within striking distance from Dani. The insect went careening towards another one of its kin and both of them crashed down to the ground.

“…Or you can just do that… that works too.”

Ejrica helped Dani swiftly back on his feet, and the duo dashed after their friends.

It took roughly a minute for the gang to rush to the valley’s exit. The swarm of bees showed no signs of letting up yet. As the bees kept on coming, Zeriah and Reiram remained lagging behind the rest to fend off the rain of the dagger-esque stingers.

Reiram drew out his edge-rifle – a firearm equipped with a thin blade along the barrel of the gun – from its holster and smacked one of the bees aside in a single motion.

“Go on, Zeriah. I’ll handle this on my own.”

“Like hell you will! Don’t try to act so cool!”

“There’s nothing *cool* in getting yourself killed! Now go!”

A bee came rushing for Zeriah from his right flank. Before the boy could react, Reiram leapt in and gave the striped insect a whack with the stock of his edge-rifle.

“Move!!”

“I totally had that one!”

Miste shouted for the dawdling swordsman.

“Come on, Zeri, let’s go!”

Reiram placed himself firmly between Zeriah and the swarm of bees.

“You heard the little missy, go!”

Zeriah made a reluctant move towards the exit while gnashing his teeth in frustration.

Just then, the earsplitting screeches of the honey gliders returned, thundering throughout the valley.

The swarm of pebble bees stopped their advance immediately upon hearing the shrieks of their natural enemy. The bees began retreating back into the depths of the valley, completely ignoring the group of unwanted humans.

Soon, the forms of the feather-clad lizards appeared from beyond the horizon to descend upon the bees’ nesting grounds.

Zeriah and Reiram were left standing idle, their fighting spirits still primed.

“Tch, glad that’s over.”

“I guess we’re considered only a secondary threat.”

Miste, Dani and Ejrica arrived to join the two swordsmen.

“Will the pebble bees be alright, Dani?”

“Hard to say… their numbers are greater than the honey gliders… although the lizards are certainly agile and fierce, a predator not to be trifled with… whatever the case, a headbutting between them will end in a pile of casualties on both sides.”

Zeriah kicked a cloud of red dust towards the direction of the hive.

“Who cares!? It’s finally over, right?”

Miste felt the bottoms of her feet itching, calling her towards the depths of the valley. Even though the danger was over, and she and her friends had survived unscathed, to the girl, an abrupt ending like this felt wrong.

“Dani, what do you want to do?”

“Huh? How do you mean, Mystic-M?”

“Doesn’t it feel like something is amiss, like we should be giving something back?”

Dani stared at Miste with a cluster of question marks dangling over his head. After a moment, he reached for one of his pouches and pulled out a jar of the honey he’d gotten from Pakel. A while of ponderous eyeing at the amber nectar later, a flash of realization exploded over Dani’s face. He squeezed the jar intensely.

“Yeah, I think I get what you’re getting at, and I feel the same!”

Miste and Dani shared a steely nod before starting towards the hive.

“Let’s go, everyone!”

Zeriah swiped his sword through the dry red earth.

“Wait–what!? You want to go back there!? After we just escaped by the skin of our teeth!?”

“I know, Zeri, but we have to help them. The bees have provided us with such treats, I feel bad for simply leaving them at the mercy of those thieving plume-heads.”

“Seriously…”

Reiram gave Zeriah a firm nudge on the shoulder.

“The longer we spent pondering, the longer we give the gliders time to wreak havoc. The little missy is a stubborn bumpkin; I believe arguing over this won’t be of use, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Tch… I guess. Although you could try not adding that unneeded insult in there.”

“I could, and you two could always strive to be less of a *pair of bumpkins* – how’s that sound?”

“Shut up…”

Zeriah cradled Miste under his left arm and gave the girl a playful shake.

“Fine, if that’s the way you want it, then let’s do this thing.”

“Yes! I knew I could count on you.”

Ejrica walked beside Miste to gaze towards the depths of the valley.

“I honestly hope Sakuya can appreciate all this excitement. Seems like there’s never a dull moment with you people.”

As the party headed back for the beehive, the screeches of the honey gliders and the furious buzzing of the pebble bees grew more intense. By the time the humans reached the hive, the area was engulfed by a storm of orange and black fuzz, as the bees

bumbled around in an attempt to drive away the huge flying lizards that had come to snack on their honey. The honey gliders kept swooping down from the heavens, gnawing at the bees with their mighty beaks and swinging at them with their wings and their tails. It was utter chaos. Many of the bees were twitching on the ground after being knocked out. A few of the lizards had been skewered from all sides by the bees' stingers, now sticking out of their corpses. The bees that had lost their weapons in battle rested next to their triumphantly felled prey, joining them in silence and death.

Neither pack of animals seemed to pay mind to the group of arriving humans. From the honey gliders, ignoring the new threat was a mistake.

The group remained by the sidelines of the battle, wary of getting accidentally stung by one of the hundreds of swarming bees. Whenever one of the honey gliders got close, the group would take part in the bees' effort to battle their enemies.

Miste conjured an enormous fist using Yggdrazil's power and managed to slam one of the lizards squarely on the head as it swooped past the girl. The creature crashed to the ground and remained there in a state of daze.

Zeriah used the felled lizard as a boosting point and leapt for another honey glider coming in from higher up. He took a swing at the creature with his sword, cleaving deep at the tip of its wing. The glider lost control of its flight and went spiraling towards the wall of the valley.

Dani loaded his crossbow with a wire-arrow and knotted the reel of the wire around a jagged rock near the wall. A masterful shot delivered the arrow directly through the tail of one of the

honey gliders. The hooked lizard came slamming against the wall of the valley as the wire began reeling in.

One of the lizards took notice of the party of Adventurers and launched a preemptive strike towards Reiram. The creature zoomed in with its talons spread out like an enormous beartrap ready to snap. Reiram faced the creature head on, slamming his edge-rifle against the talons, as if offering the lizard a perch to grab hold of. The honey glider did just that, coiling its hook-like nails around Reiram's weapon. The exchange turned into a tug of war between the ferocious creature and the stern elder Adventurer; the honey glider began flapping its wings to pull up, and Reiram yanked on his weapon like reeling in an enormous kite from the clutches of a fierce storm. In the end, with a mighty swing over his head, Reiram brought the honey glider to slam against the ground.

Ejrica leapt up the wall of the valley, climbing up with nimble bouncing like some kind of elegant chinchilla. She kicked off the wall with explosive might and drilled her foot against the beak of a passing honey glider. The exotic lady came crashing down along the lizard, right over the one Reiram had managed to bring down. Ejrica leapt down from the pile of knocked out lizards with a floaty cartwheel.

A peculiar sequence of alarming shrieks thundered from high above the valley. The main bulk of the honey glider flock was still circling the skies over the battle, with a few of the lizards occasionally dropping down into the fray. At the middle of the flock, a single exalted glider, with massive wings that put all its kin to shame, kept hovering in place while screeching out its cries of war.

More and more of the honey gliders kept dropping down to battle the bees. The striped insects' numbers were fast dwindling under the endless assault.

Miste peered towards the mighty commander of the honey glider flock, recognizing it as the same lizard that had snatched Dani earlier.

"We have to end this and fast… Dani, is that huge glider important somehow?"

"Yeah, I think it's the alpha glider, each flock has a leader conducting their hunt."

"So if we take it down, the others might turn to flee?"

"Possibly. It's too high though, I don't think my arrows will carry that long."

"Reiram, how about you?"

"Sorry to say, but I used the last of my bullets back in Powderberg. At this point, this rifle here isn't but a quirky-looking sword."

Zeriah tapped the gauntlet around Miste's arm with the handle of his sword.

"We got a pair of wings of our own, right?"

"Yea, I'm just not sure if I'll reach that high. It takes quite a toll on me to create the wings, and if I run out of juice up there, I'll come crashing smack down to the ground."

Ejrica stepped forth with an idea.

"I'll handle it. If you throw me up there, Miste, I'll take the leader down."

"Are you sure? How are you planning on getting down?"

The exotic lady pressed her palm against her chest. The dark ink in her eyes gleamed with confidence.

“Have faith in me.”

“Alright then, I’ll give it a shot.”

Miste activated Yggdrazil’s ability and drew as much energy from within herself as she could. An enormous palm of gleaming azure manifested itself around her right arm.

“Hop on, Ejrica!”

The lady climbed to kneel atop the artificial palm. She gave the mass of energy a light brush with her fingers, a surprised smirk spreading on her lips.

“Heh, interesting, it feels warm to touch.”

Dani slipped to stand next to Ejrica. He was about to reach out to her, but stopped halfway, his hand halting for awkward twitching.

“Just… come back safe, okay?”

Ejrica’s answer came punctuated with her biting her lip.

“I intend to do so.”

She turned for Miste with a firm nod.

“Do it.”

“Okay, I hope this works…”

Miste channeled her remaining ounces of strength into her right arm while taking her best pitching stance. She swung her arm towards the heavens in a mighty arc, and the exotic lady standing on her palm launched towards the sky like a mortar shell.

Ejrica swished past the storm of feathery wings and fuzzy bellies hovering above the valley, careening straight for the alpha glider looming at the center of its kin. As she neared the mighty lizard, Ejrica twirled herself into a continuous cartwheel, turning her entire body to resemble an enormous shuriken. The alpha glider didn't realize the impossible attack coming until it was already too late. Ejrica's right leg hurled for the creature's head with all the added momentum from her acrobatic twirling. The kick connected with a booming crack, loud enough to be heard all the way at the bottom of the valley.

The alpha glider was sent plummeting down by the monstrous power of Ejrica's attack. The lizard seemed like its wings had suddenly gained a coating of lead. Ejrica stood firm over the creature's head, keeping her feet drilled against its neck as the two fell towards the floor of the valley.

A united flinch in suspense took over the party of Adventurers below as the massive lizard and the exotic lady came spiraling down fast.

At the last possible second, Ejrica leapt off the creature with a backwards somersault, embodying the elegance of a swallow drawing loops through the sky. She landed into a soft squat, graceful, as if the ground beneath her was made of marshmallows.

The alpha glider was met with a more gruesome date with the soil. The lizard crashed against the bottom of the valley, sending a cloud of red dust exploding to every direction, the sound of the impact thundering out like a house being demolished. The group was forced to cover their faces as the fine powder spewed to clog their eyes and noses. From beyond the veil of red soil, a single screech of the alpha glider came trumpeting out, tired

and coarse. After the dust settled, the creature was revealed lying down in deadly silence, a crackle at the tip of its beak gushing with crimson blood.

The flock of honey gliders was sent into a state of chaotic flailing and alarmed honking. As the lizards began lifting higher for an escape, a few of them got surrounded by the swarm of bees and met their end as dozens of dark daggers skewered them from all sides.

The luckier part of the honey glider flock kept hammering down with their wings, gathering height, until from the ground they looked no bigger than dragonflies. The feathery lizards turned to glide away from the valley in a disorganized clump, all the while their trademark screeches kept drawing away, soon remaining only as a distant echo, then leaving the valley serene once more.

The silence wasn't quite complete though, as the buzzing of the pebble bees still lingered. Reassuringly to the humans, the buzzing had found a noticeably less-hostile, harmonious melody. The swarm gathered to tend to their fallen comrades.

In the aftermath of the battle, an interesting detail caught Miste's eye; at the exact spot where Ejrica had landed, the earth was fissured, like the woman had stomped down with massive force. At the same time, Ejrica was completely unharmed by the fall. How Ejrica was able to withstand such punishment, Miste did not know – all she did know was that the exotic lady was clearly built like no other.

Sakuya emerged to perch over Ejrica's shoulder.

"That was totally awesome, let's do it again!"

“I believe that’s quite enough excitement for one day… at least I hope.”

The gang rushed to meet Ejrica.

“You were fantastic!”

“A++ for the acrobatics! Wooh!”

Miste and Dani clamped the exotic lady by the hand from either side, their faces beaming with fiery admiration.

“Thank you, although I believe it was a team effort, Miste.”

“Oh shucks, it was a simple thing! I just brute forced you up there. What you did was plain cool.”

Miste threw out a couple of playful chops and kicks at an imaginary foe.

“Man, if only I could fight like you… imagine all the awesome stuff I could do with Yggdrazil’s power.”

Miste tripped backwards amidst her frolicking. Zeriah’s firm grip saved her from tumbling down on the rusty-red soil.

“Don’t overexert yourself – you’ve used a lot of your stamina.”

“Right, I’ll try to take it easy.”

After the adrenalin in Miste’s veins started to simmer down, she felt herself rather woozy. Although her affinity with Yggdrazil was no doubt getting stronger day by day, the pool of energy within her to fuel the astral ability was still leaving a lot to be desired.

Dani leaned to rub shoulders with Ejrica.

“You all did awesome. What matters the most though is that Ejrica is safely back with us.”

Ejrica slammed her hand against Dani's face and pushed the frisking boy away, annoyed.

"Please refrain from any excessive familiarities."

One of the pebble bees skittered over to the group while rubbing its antennae together. It buzzed out a rhythmic rattle with its wings and reached its two black feelers towards the sky. The insect's face betrayed no emotion, but from its playful movements one could presume the bee was feeling happy. The striped fuzzball of orange and black seemed to be particularly interested in Ejrica. It tapped the exotic woman on the chest with its antennae.

"What now?!"

Dani beamed a chuckling smile at Ejrica.

"I'm guessing that the queen is sending us her regards. You did save their hide… I mean *hive*, after all."

"The queen bee is using telepathy to control this little one, right?"

"That's what the researchers say at least."

"Should I do something to respond?"

"I bet they already know how we feel."

The swarm of pebble bees all around the group were carrying their fallen brethren towards the holes leading to their hive. A portion of the swarm gathered over the fallen honey gliders and proceeded to spew a thin string of white webbing around the corpses.

Miste kept observing the bees work with great interest.

"What are they doing, Dani?"

“They’ll carry their fellow bees for their nest. They’ll be stored inside a special melting chamber, covered with the bees’ toxins, where the corpses will turn into a food-paste used by the rest of the hive. The cocooning around the honey gliders works the same way, they are simply too big to carry inside.”

“That’s… kinda creepy…”

Reiram snorted with patronizing amusement.

“Simply the way of nature, as things should be. The bees leave nothing to waste.”

“Rei-Rei is right. It’s the bees’ way of respecting the fallen, both theirs and their enemies’.”

A swirl of iridescent dust materialized next to Reiram, and the form of Freyja appeared from the cloud. The lady astra beamed ethereal warmth.

“The circle of life is eternal, as is the flow of energy. It never disappears, simply converts and takes new forms, always striving to build something greater than what cometh before it.”

The lady astra and the bee locked gazes. The insect gave its head an interested rub with its antenna. It skittered near the astra, examining the curious arrival all around. The bee rose to buzz on its wings and moved through the ghostly woman. Once it reached the other side, the bee made a thrilled loop in the air. The entire swarm of pebble bees seemed to gain in vigor, all joining in high-spirited buzzing.

“What just happened, Freyja?”

“Hard to say for certain. It is unknown how animals interpret the presence of us astra. The bees seem to view our meeting as something unique, a chance encounter to be grateful of.”

“Tch, a whole lot of buzz out of nothing if you ask me.”

“I’m going to pretend I did not hear that, Reiram.”

The gang spent a while watching the bees work before heading for the exit of the valley -– the tranquil rubbing of tiny wings sent the group of heroic Adventurers off with a merry melody.

* * *

After trekking a while inside walls of rusty-red rock, the vista of luscious green steppe felt liberating. Every path was open, wherever one would gaze; past the horizon loomed nothing except clear blue skies inviting a would-be-explorer to quench their thirst for another adventure.

“Whew, what a day!”

Miste took in a deep breath. The gentle summer breeze flowing over the steppe gathered in her hair, filling her spirit with fresh vigor.

“In the morning, I never would’ve thought we’d end up having such an adventure.”

Zeriah gave Miste’s hair a ruffle.

“I don’t think any of us did.”

“A shame about the train though…”

Reiram passed the couple while tugging the brim of his hat to shade his face.

“We will stay the night in Pakel and simply take the next train tomorrow. Don’t worry, you two whippersnappers will get to the Capital in due time.”

“Sounds like a plan. Though who the hell says *whippersnapper* these days?”

Dani scurried in front of the group with a sunny grin decorating his face.

"*Or*…"

The group stopped in anticipation.

"…we could *not*!"

"Huh? What are you on about?"

"There's always alternatives! Rei-Rei, what do you think, how long will it take for Jotel?"

"Hmm, that's in the opposite direction from Pakel. If we leave now and stay the night in the wilderness, I'd say we'll reach Jotel in a day. Why?"

"Just weighing our options here. Trains are nice an' all, but the riverboat from Jotel will get us to the Capital all the same. It would be a nice change of pace too, right?"

Dani locked eyes with each of his travel companions, fishing support for his out-of-the-blue idea. The boy offered Ejrica a tad longer eyeballing.

"How about it, guys, wanna go on another adventure?"

Miste clasped her right hand tightly and punched at the skies.

"No need to ask, of course!"

Zeriah and Reiram gave each other a sly glance.

"I don't mind stretching my legs a bit. How 'bout you, Mr. Grumpypants?"

"Sure, why not, a few extra days with you bumpkins is neither here nor there…"

Ejrica bobbed a casual shrug.

“I am content with whatever you decide.”

Dani threw his hand towards the horizon – the direction of the town of Jotel.

“Then what are we still waiting for? Let’s go guys!”

* * *

“This *is* good, just like I remembered it.”

“I’ve never met anyone who could stomach that much honey in one sitting.”

“Come on, Big-Z, you guys can’t deny that it’s the best you’ve ever had.”

“It is. But it’s also all sugar; I think I’d throw up after that much sweet, no matter how good it is.”

“Now *that* would be a real waste, Zeri, hihi!”

“By the by – did you know, Mystic-M, that bees are actually the only creatures in the whole world who know how to make honey! Scientists have tried to replicate the process for ages, but have yet to succeed.”

“That so? Hmm, I guess science has its limitations. Bees sure are peculiar creatures.”

“And furthermore, did you know that bees are responsible for the pollination of a third of the entire world’s plant life?”

“Wow, really?! We should be extra grateful to the little guys. Nature sure has lots of wonders…”

Zeriah flung his arm across Miste’s shoulders and pulled the girl close.

“It sure does. It just sometimes needs a little help to flourish.”

“Yeah!”

As the party of Adventurers made their way through the fields of green and towards the endless horizon, Miste felt her heart softly pounding against her chest, a gentle tugging that called her forth, always forth, though never blind to the beauty or sorrow around her.

For whatever may come her way, no matter what tribulation or challenge, there was one thing Miste knew to be the truth; the only way for her to go was forward!

VERSE #25: BETWEEN THE TWO OF US

A murmur sounding from the deepest depths of Dani’s empty stomach woke him up. The young Adventurer twitched up to sit, the bed of leaves and branches crunched and crackled underneath him in response.

The woodlands were still covered in soft twilight. Tiniest slivers of golden beams loomed far beyond the horizon, sprinkling the treetops with a luminous edging.

The morning air felt nice and cool. A humid gust of wind whisked past the campsite, carrying a mixture of pine and alder, a potent perfume to freshen Dani’s senses in an instant. Summertime in Zirinia tended to be gentle, as soon as the annual season of storms at the end of spring was over, that is. There was no better time to be wandering through the wilderness, and in Dani’s case, neither could he ask for better company.

Miste and Zeriah were still sound asleep, cuddled around one another on their own bed of leaves. Their shared rest was the epitome of serenity; in their coiled calm, the two had become one. The way that Miste kept breathing softly, her mouth narrowly open, and brushing Zeriah's hair to dance, while Zeriah answered to each breath with a teensy twitch of his fingers sliding along Miste's spine, was almost hypnotizing to watch. To Dani, seeing his friends in their cozy bliss was reassuring; their shared warmth made his own heart gleam in response.

Dani cranked himself to stand, stretching widely. His long, jaw-creaking yawn sounded over the campsite, mixing with the gleeful whistling of a literal early bird soaring high above the treetops. The boy sneaked further from the sleeping couple, careful not to disturb them. The rest of the makeshift bunks around the fizzled campfire were empty. Ejrica and Reiram were nowhere to be seen.

Dani's equipment was lying next to a tree at the edge of the camp; a tangled mess of wires, straps, holsters and pouches, along a hefty quiver and a rugged crossbow. He grabbed the pile of stuff and flung the whole thing over his shoulders and across his waist with a single swift motion. Through years of practice, Dani had built a knack for handling his gear.

The young Adventurer started towards the direction of a river that the group had passed by yesterday. Fresh fish for breakfast would be just the thing.

"Don't go wandering too far."

Dani flinched from surprise as Reiram's voice suddenly reached his ears from behind the tree. The boy paced around the tree

and found his elder colleague sitting upon one of the mighty roots.

“Morning, Rei-Rei! Man, you nearly gave me a heart attack just now.”

The elder Adventurer hiding underneath a trench coat and a wide-brimmed hat tended to remain silent and secluded unless needed, so much so that one might mistake him for a statue. The man gave his hat a nudge while glaring at Dani from under the brim.

“You should be grateful that I wasn’t an aurora wolf looking for a scrawny trickster to munch on.”

“Heh, fair enough… Were you up all night?”

“Yes, someone had to keep watch. I don’t know what it is about you, Dani, but with you around, it feels like more and more beasts are allured towards us.”

“Hmm, can’t say why that would be. Maybe it’s the aura of a hunter, y’know, circle of life an’ all that stuff. Sometimes you’re the one giving chase – and other times you get chased in turn.”

“Well, you might consider snuffing out that glistening aura, no? Between all the wolfs, ravenous rabbits, bees and flying lizards that we’ve had to deal with as of late, I feel like I’m resting at the bottom of the food chain, and frankly, I really do not care for it.”

“Sorry, Rei-Rei, but I don’t think I can help my natural tastiness. Heheh! So, did you see anything interesting?”

“Nothing but owls and lemmings, luckily, this area seems to be free of large predators.”

Dani dropped into a squat to face Reiram directly, a sunny grin on his face.

“Tell ya what, I was about to head for the river anyway, so I’m gonna catch you a mighty fatty fish as thanks for being our guardian angel! How about it?”

Reiram’s face twisted into an X-shaped scowl, dripping with snark.

“Oh, sure, that will make it *all* worth it.”

Dani ignored the obvious sarcasm and kept beaming his energetic smile.

“Leave it to me – one fatty fish coming right up! Look forward to it, Rei-Rei.”

Dani had time to take a mere step before Reiram called out to him again.

“One thing before you go. Ejrica said she was heading for the riverbank to train. Please try to avoid stumbling on any scene that is not meant for your eyes.”

“Huh? Like what?”

“A young maiden… a sweat-filled workout… a glimmering stream… do I honestly need to spell this out for you?”

“You mean… oh, OH!”

“Yes, *that*. So, for the love of all that is sane, do not, I repeat, DO NOT, create any embarrassing situations.”

“Come now, Rei-Rei, I’m a gentleman! I’d never make a girl feel embarrassed like that. And I don’t think Ejrica would even be so petty as to mind something done by accident… would she?”

“How should I know!? Just don’t screw up.”

“Why do you even care so much?”

“Because it would be unfathomably annoying to watch you two getting all flustered with each other for the rest of the trip.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you down, Rei-Rei.”

“One can only hope…”

* * *

The river was only half a kilometer away from the campsite. The gentle gushing of water could be heard beyond a couple thickets further. As Dani crept closer to the stream, he made sure to peer ahead thoroughly; any signs of Ejrica being in a compromising state would make the boy turn on his heels right away.

In truth, Dani would never desire anything that would leave Ejrica feeling uncomfortable around him. Even though Dani realized his own feelings towards the exotic beauty – they had been clear from the first moment the pair had locked eyes back in Powderberg – he couldn’t be certain of how strongly Ejrica felt for him in return. At the very least, Ejrica considered him a friend, a brother in arms, as well as respected him as an Adventurer. Past that, who knows.

The fact that Ejrica had decided to join the group on their travels had been enough to make Dani’s heart to drum out thunderously and his soul to trumpet with glee. The mere presence of Dani’s dream girl was at the moment enough for him.

The terrain came to a gentle incline; a sandy slope led for a tiny bay where the flow of the river was calm. By the shoreline, Ejrica was sitting on a smooth rock while splashing her feet in the shallow water. As a slight relief to Dani, Ejrica was fully clothed. Her dark and curly hair rested on her shoulders, with

droplets of water rolling down from the tips of her locks, flashing in the early morning sun like diamonds as they dripped over her chest. It would seem like Dani had just missed the show.

Dani approached Ejrica with a cheery wave.

“Morning!”

The exotic lady waited until Dani had seated himself next to her before responding.

“Good morning, Dani.”

“It is certainly good, and getting better by the second, hehe!”

Ejrica returned Dani’s wide grin with a thin smile.

The boy began preparing his crossbow, loading it with a wire-arrow. Usually, Dani could have his weapon firing-ready in literally less than a second, but today, seeing as the scenery surrounding him was filled with such natural beauty, he decided to take his time whilst making his movements playfully pronounced.

“So, are you a morning person, Ejrica, or did you have trouble sleeping?”

“Diligence is the only path that will lead to results – I try to slip in a bit of training whenever I can.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what the road to mastery takes.”

Ejrica remained quiet, eyeing aimlessly at the glimmering stream.

While fiddling with his crossbow, Dani slid his gaze slowly along Ejrica’s frame – from the top of her head full of richly curling dark hair, along her slender body, down her finely molded

muscular legs, all the way to the tips of her graceful toes soaking underneath the river's soft waves.

"How's the water?"

"It is refreshingly cool. Although I believe by your Zirinian standards it is quite warm."

"Serestria has different measurements for warmth?"

Ejrica flashed Dani a well-humored smirk.

"Considering that our great river, *Bloudssum*, literally boils during midsummer, yes, you could say that."

"Heh, alright, that's kinda intense, I'll give you that. It's amazing how well you handled yourself back in Powderberg; I mean, I felt like I was gonna freeze stiff, but you on the other hand, being used to the sun much more than us, were just prancing around barefoot in the snow like it was nothing. I commend your guts!"

"It was all to strengthen my will. After a set time, you build an immunity to external sources shackling you, pain and fear… or at least that's what is expected from warriors…"

Ejrica flicked her right foot to the surface, sending a splash of water flying forth in a gentle shower.

"I can't deny it though, after tempering myself amidst the ice and snow, I've come to rather enjoy the gentle sensation of this kingdom's summer. A bit of adversity makes you appreciate the little things."

Dani's gaze was glued on the eyes of the exotic lady, and the dark ink swirling inside them. No matter the situation, deep within, Ejrica's eyes always radiated warmth, like two jet-black

suns, so beautifully alluring, Dani simply wanted to bask under their grace eternally.

“Yeah, it really does make you appreciate stuff…”

Ejrica brought her left foot to join the other one with another splash of water. She pulled her feet closer, readjusting her stance to sit cross-legged. As she turned to face Dani, Ejrica’s alluringly deep and dark chinchilla-eyes sharpened with a steely glint. She tilted her head askingly.

“Is something the matter?”

“Huh? No! Nuh-uh! Nothing! Everything is awesome, *the awesomest*, in fact.”

Dani felt a bit embarrassed, for the beauty had just caught him gawking at her like some sort of simpleton.

Ejrica drilled Dani with her sharpened gaze, the tattoos that decorated her eyes adding to the slicing might of her stare. After a while, the lady softened her glare and shrugged. She pointed at Dani’s lap.

“What are you planning with the crossbow?”

“I thought I’d catch some fish for breakfast.”

“With that?”

Dani stood up while giving a cool tap to his trusted weapon of choice.

“Don’t sound so surprised, I’m pretty accurate with this thing. Plus, I have a little something to help me.”

The young Adventurer pulled out a peculiar headpiece from one of his pouches: a green half-visor with a temple to attach the

device around his right ear. Dani made quick adjustments to a knob located on the outer frame of the odd monocle.

“This visor is designed to correct depth perception and such while aiming for underwater targets.”

“I see, interesting.”

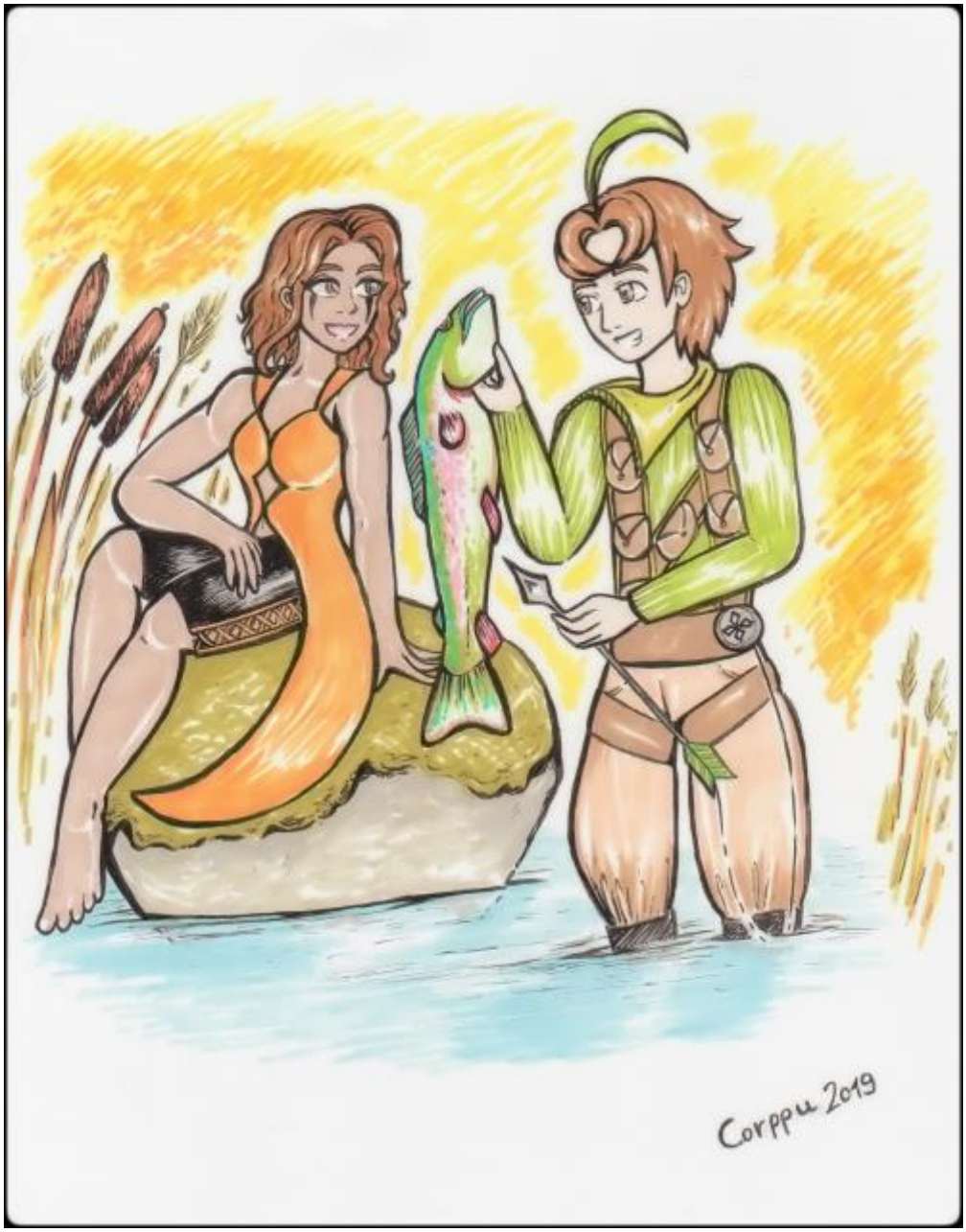
Dani took aim at the river. The visor had a built-in zoom effect that helped him see clearly even when targeting far offshore. It wasn’t long till Dani caught a nicely grown trout in his sights. A moment of anticipation grew over the riverbank as the young Adventurer moved the tip of his weapon slowly downstream, following the movements of the fish.

A pull of the trigger – and the arrow went diving beneath the waves, piercing the trout. A few seconds later, the wire that was connected to the belt on Dani’s waist began reeling the arrow back. The trout got yanked towards the shore. Once close enough, Dani lifted the skewered fish out of the water.

“Ta-dah!”

Ejrica gave the boy a quick applause along an approving nod.

“Impressive!”



Dani picked up a rock from the shore and clubbed the twitching trout. He gave the hefty fish a ponderous look.

“Hmm, what do you think, would you consider this guy a *fatty*?”

“I… I wouldn’t really know… Why?”

“Rei-Rei was being such a grumpy-grump again, so I promised to treat him to a fatty and yummy fish to cheer him up.”

“I guess it’s quite big…”

“You’re right, it’s nowhere near fatty enough! I’ll catch another one!”

Dani handed the trout to Ejrica, or rather threw the fish straight at her.

“Hold this for a moment.”

Ejrica snatched the fish by its tail.

“What are you planning?”

Dani gathered a pile of twigs from the upper part of the riverbank. He took a worn-out fire piston from one of his pockets and lit the twigs ablaze. After a quick cleaning and salting, the *not-quite-fatty-enough trout* found its way standing next to the flame, skewered on Dani’s arrows.

As Dani returned to scouting the riverbed for a heftier catch, Ejrica reached out to him with confusion.

“Couldn’t we just cook the fish once we get back to camp?”

“Uh-huh, but it doesn’t really matter, here or there, it cooks the same, right?”

“Right…?”

“It’s still early, and I for one am in no hurry. I say we let Big-Z and Mystic-M snooze a bit longer before we come back with the treats.”

Dani took another shot at the river, nailing another trout, and reeling back the prize a moment later. The boy placed the fish to cook next to its kin. Compared side by side, the newer catch was clearly grander.

“Now there’s a nice and fatty fishie. Rei-Rei will surely love this!”

“You make it sound like Reiram is going to eat it all by himself…”

Dani sat down next to the bonfire.

“These will take a while to cook. Come sit and relax, Ejrica.”

Dani tapped the sandy patch of land beside him invitingly.

Ejrica got up from her rock and walked for the softly dancing flame, though decidedly on the opposite side from Dani.

The two sat silently, listening as the woodlands around them got livelier by the minute as the rising sun made the denizens of the forest frisky. A melody of rustling bushes, soaring whistle of birds, a splash of water followed by a pompous croak of a toad climbing ashore, and a soft gust of wind that made the treetops swish, it all came together as a harmonious tune in celebration of another beautiful summer dawn.

The scent from the fried fish dripping with natural oils turned slowly from appetizing to intoxicating. Dani’s stomach joined the sounds of nature with its ravenous growling. The sudden rumble echoing from within the young Adventurer made the exotic lady near him chuckle tenderly.

“Sounds like someone else besides Reiram is craving for the fatty fish.”

“Hehe, you got me there. I’m so hungry, I could probably munch the whole river dry of trout.”

Ejrica’s laughter left a gentle smile on her lips. Seeing the beauty beaming her serene graces at him stirred a conflicting mess of emotions within Dani; on one hand, the boy would burst with glee whenever he saw her dream girl smiling, yet on the other hand, the fact that he couldn’t bring himself to tell Ejrica exactly

how strongly he felt about her made a hard lump to form under his chest, coarse and prickly, constantly scraping his heart.

Dani had always considered himself a rather fearless person, as to be expected from an Adventurer, and yet, something so meek as uttering a few simple words to someone he loved terrified him. He was afraid that his feelings wouldn't be met, or worse yet, that his arrogance would drive Ejrica away. At the end of the day, who was *he* to expect that such a beautiful, kind, confident and powerful woman would be interested in him as anything more than just a friend. Finding out the whether-or-not to this question was a leap of faith that Dani wasn't strong enough to take. He wouldn't risk his friendship with Ejrica.

Dani returned Ejrica's smile in kind. He pushed aside all the negative thoughts mucking his mind. Even if he was to never call Ejrica his own, he'd make sure to savor every moment he could spend with her.

Dani leaned backwards and dropped to lay on his back. The sky was filled with thin strings of clouds, coiling around one another as they floated towards their unknown destination.

Dani took a deep breath of the humid morning air mixed with the succulent smell of grilled fish, and relaxed his entire body while breathing out. The collection of sensations around Dani, the calm breeze brushing through his hair, the warm touch of the sun, the soft sloshing of the river close by, and the bed of fine sand beneath him, created a tiny compressed moment in time, one of utter tranquility. If this moment was to last for the next eternity, Dani would've kindly let it stay untouched.

"Are you alright, Dani?"

Dani nudged to gaze past the veil of smoke rising from the bonfire. Ejrica was leaning towards him in puzzlement.

“You seemed to be in deep thought, is something bothering you?”

“Nah, all’s good… hehe… hahaha…!”

“What now, is it something that I said?”

“No, no, I’m sorry, it’s just that… This is so nice!”

“What is?”

“It’s like you said – sometimes it’s the little things that make you the happiest.”

Dani channeled the warmth of the sun tickling on his cheeks to beam out the widest of grins at Ejrica.

“Right now, I wouldn’t change a thing!”

“Dani…”

Ejrica bit her lip softly, her eyes settling on the crackling dance of the flame in front of her.

Dani turned his gaze back at the skies while taking another long, relaxing breath.

Good enough is good enough, for the time being…

* * *

Soon enough, this moment in time came to a close, as the frying of fish would only take so long.

Dani packed the catch of the day inside a tinfoil wrapping. The pockets and pouches around his attire were always stuffed with any and all essentials that one would need while traveling through the wilds.

Dani and Ejrica headed back for the campsite.

Their trek through the woods was accompanied by a constant rustling in the thickets around them. A tiny… *something*… skittered past Ejrica's feet through the undergrowth, too fast to see clearly before it disappeared amidst the bushes.

"What was that!?"

"I'd guess *a lemmingshroo*. A mixed forest like this is their favorite nesting place, and there seem to be no large predators around, so the population is probably thriving."

"It was awfully quick."

"Yeah, they tend to be super slippery. Don't worry, they are harmless. Just watch your feet so you don't accidentally fall down one of their nests."

The convoy of lemmingshroos beyond the thickets kept rustling about while Dani and Ejrica continued their trek. A little ways from the campsite, there was a small clearing. The ground felt oddly soft underneath the mat of green grass. As Dani and Ejrica moved through the clearing, the surrounding thickets burst with alarmed squeaking.

"I see, sounds like we've entered their domain. Best to turn back and go around so we don't disturb them."

The duo began backing away from the clearing.

A sudden crackle of rock was followed by a static swishing sound, like someone pouring grains of rice on the floor. The sound came from below them.

The earth gave away underneath Ejrica. She plummeted down a pitch-dark hole while the surrounding soil flumped along her like water flushing down a drain.

“Ejrica!!”

Dani managed to catch Ejrica by the hand, only to be pulled down with her.

The fall came to an abrupt stop only a few meters down as the hole curved at the bottom, turning into a horizontal tunnel. The space was cramped enough to barely fit the width of a person. It was hard to see clearly, the light from above the ground wouldn’t reach all the way to the bottom. Dani could vaguely make out Ejrica’s face right in front of her. She was still gripping tightly on both of Dani’s hands.

“Are you alright, Ejrica?”

All that Dani got as a response were sporadic breaths brushing against his cheeks.

“Ejrica?”

Ejrica squeezed Dani’s hands hard enough to make them hurt while fidgeting in place.

“Nuh… no…!”

Droplets of sweat gathered on Ejrica’s brow. Her fidgeting grew more intense. In the small enclosed space, every move brushed a cloud of dust to fill what little air there was.

“Calm down, Ejrica. What’s wrong?”

“I’m stuck… a root… around my leg…”

Ejrica’s breathing turned heavier, and her twitching and rubbing against the tunnel exploded with a crazed alarm.

“I have to get out, I can’t stay…!!”

“Relax, we’ll get out of here.”

“I can’t breathe… I’ll die… I’ll die…!!”

Ejrica’s eyes darted around like a pair of startled wasps. She mumbled something in a language Dani couldn’t understand. Ejrica slammed her eyes shut, and a tiny trail of tears rolled down her cheeks, while her fidgeting kept intensifying even more.

“Ejrica! Ejrica, you have to calm down.”

Ejrica had fallen into a terror-stricken trance, she couldn’t hear nor see anything around her.

“Sakuya, can’t you do anything to help!?”

A flutter of muted colors dashed through the darkness from behind Ejrica and past Dani, dropping over the boy’s shoulder.

“I tried, but she won’t listen to me! It’s like her soul is kicking me further and further away as we speak.”

Sakuya’s voice cracked and trembled. The giddiness that was lacking from the astra sent a chill down Dani’s spine, he had yet to hear her like this.

“Damn it…”

Dani returned Ejrica’s crushing squeeze around his hands with a firm grip of his own. He pulled himself closer to Ejrica, almost touching the tip of her nose.

“Ejrica!!! Look at me, Ejrica!”

Dani yanked on Ejrica’s hands to draw her attention. A pair of dark chinchilla-eyes glistening with tears turned to meet his gaze. Dani spoke softly, while staring deep within Ejrica’s eyes to nail her in place.

“You are *not* going to die, I promise you that, but first you need to calm down. Take deep and controlled breaths, and whatever you do, do not take your eyes off mine, got it?”

Dani brought Ejrica’s right palm against his chest.

“Just focus on the beating of my heart.”

Ejrica twitched her head slightly to nod. She began to steady her breaths as instructed.

“I will never let anything happen to you; I swear it. I am here, Ejrica.”

Dani let Ejrica take her time, and bit by bit, she calmed herself down. Once she had adequately mellowed, Dani loosened his grip on her hands.

“Okay, that’s better. Now, I have to ask you to do as I say. I know it’s scary, but I promise we’ll both get out of here soon. Can you trust me?”

Ejrica responded with a shivering nod.

“Good, try to press yourself against the wall of the tunnel as tight as you can.”

Ejrica nudged to the side, creating a thin space from where Dani could see past her. Ejrica’s leg was caught under a root arcing slightly above the tunnel floor.

Dani reached for his quiver and pulled out an arrow.

“Now, it’s going to get a bit cramped, but try to keep calm and still, I don’t want to cut your leg by accident.”

Dani nudged forth, sliding his hand holding the arrow past Ejrica. The pair was now lying with their cheeks nuzzling

against one another. Dani felt how Ejrica's entire body jittered suddenly.

"It's alright, just focus on my heartbeat… that's it… that's it…"

It took a fair bit of stretching his arm, but in the end, Dani managed to slip the arrow underneath the root and slice it open. He pulled out softly to meet Ejrica's gaze.

"There, you're free. Now, I'll back out and try to climb out of here. I'll pull you out once I get up, okay?"

As Dani began backing away, Ejrica's hand resting on his chest tightened to grab onto his shirt.

"Don't worry, I won't abandon you. Trust me."

Ejrica reluctantly released her grip.

Dani managed to nudge himself around to face the exit of the tunnel. A bunch of roots sticking from the walls created a decent ladder for climbing out. Once Dani got back on the surface he lowered the wire around his waist down the hole.

"Grab on, Ejrica!"

Dani poured all his strength into reeling in the biggest catch of the day, and soon enough, Ejrica joined him above the ground. Dani helped Ejrica to rest by the root of a nearby tree. Her entire body was still ensnared by crippling jitteriness.

Dani kneeled beside Ejrica, while making sure to keep enough distance to allow her to breathe freely.

"It's over now."

Ejrica's jitteriness, along her breathing, calmed down slowly.

"Thank you…"

Sakuya zoomed from Dani's shoulder to cradle herself against Ejrica's lap.

"I'm so glad you're safe! I was so scared!"

"I'm sorry for worrying you."

"Don't apologize, dummy! I'm the one who's sorry! I couldn't help at all…"

Dani got up and took a few paces away from the exotic lady and the tiny astra cuddling her. He dropped a soundless sigh in relief. Ejrica seemed to be doing okay, a bit weary from the shock, but otherwise fine.

"So, uhm… how long have you been… afraid of…?"

Ejrica tilted her head slightly towards Dani, though keeping her gaze nailed to the ground.

"You mean… how long have I been claustrophobic? Ever since I was little. Whenever I would travel through the catacombs back home, I'd always feel anxious… and over the years, it got worse… eventually I started having these panic attacks. I can't help it, I just… collapse."

"Wait… is that why you wouldn't travel inside the train with us?"

"Yes, I simply couldn't risk it."

Ejrica covered her face with her arm.

"Forgive me, Dani. I feel so ashamed for revealing myself to you in such a pitiful state."

Dani was forced to take a moment to reroute his brain, for the absurdity of Ejrica's statement was enough to throw him off entirely.

“What are you talking about!? I’m just glad everything’s fine now. There’s no shame if you can’t help it.”

“My weakness… it is unfitting for someone like me…”

“Well, I for one don’t think any less of you, if that’s what you’re worried about. You’re still the same Ejrica as you were this morning, the one I know.”

Ejrica lowered her hand and stared at Dani with her moist chinchilla-eyes. Her lips twitched haphazardly, trying to find words. She suddenly jumped to stand and bowed deep at the boy.

“I am thankful for your understanding, and eternally grateful to you for helping me. Thank you.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of thanking… keep that up and you’ll make me blush, hehehe!”

Ejrica lifted her head, a thin smile decorating her face, her gaze slightly averted.

“Dani…”

The boy flinched upon hearing his name forming on the exotic beauty’s lips. Not that he hadn’t heard Ejrica uttering it before, but the tone in which she said it had an entirely new kind of weight to it.

“…What you did means a lot to me, I can’t even begin to tell you. No one has ever been able to help me like you did.”

Ejrica pressed her hand against her chest and gripped her tunic tightly.

“The beating of your heart… it was so firm and warm; it was unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.”

She turned her gaze discreetly towards Dani.

“I wouldn’t say this to just anyone – I want you to understand your merit.”

Dani’s firm and warm heart drummed a gleeful beat, and the boy nodded with confidence.

“I’m glad I could help – you can count on me anytime!”

The two of them shared a moment of heartfelt smiles and resolutely locked gazes.

Sakuya drooped over Ejrica’s shoulder while fishing for her eyes.

“My, my… isn’t this a nice scene…”

A startled shudder ran through Ejrica. She turned to leer at the tiny astra who was grinning slyly at her.

“I… uh… I have no idea what you are talking about, Sakuya.”

“It’s just interesting how your own heart is going all *ba-bumb, ba-bumb*, teehee!”

“Well of course it does! After what just happened, isn’t it only natural?”

“Sure, sure, whatever, blame it all on that if you want.”

Sakuya fluttered from Ejrica’s shoulder and drew a loop around Dani, wrapping him inside the flowing hem of her garb. The astra laid a giggly smile on the boy.

“Thanks for saving my partner, you were totally awesome, Dani.”

“Heh, *totally awesome* is the name of my game. Accept no substitutes!”

Sakuya flew a couple more loops around the boy while chiming her childlike giggle. She zoomed back to Ejrica and dived behind her back while waving Dani a cheery goodbye.

“See you later! You two play nice!”

Sakuya’s impossibly long hem followed in her wake and vanished from existence behind Ejrica’s back.

The exotic beauty crossed her arms in annoyed defiance.

“I cannot fathom where Sakuya gets all that energy…”

“She’s just happy, and I can’t blame her, after all, she gets to spent time with you twenty-four seven.”

Dani sent Ejrica a winking grin. She turned away while rubbing her arms awkwardly.

“That’s really not something one should be overly happy about.”

Dani’s entire soul let out a longing sigh.

If only you knew, Ejrica…

Something tickly nudged against Dani’s leg. A fuzzy brown mat of lemmingshroos was gathering around Dani’s feet. The herd let out tiny chirps while skittering about. A couple of the little creatures were carrying the fishes that Dani had caught. Dani picked up the bundles of gleaming tinfoil off the creatures’ backs.

“Thanks little guys, almost forgot about these.”

The lemmingshroo herd skittered forth and gathered around Ejrica, poking and sniffing at the lady’s feet.

“I hope they aren’t angry for us invading their home.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, I bet they are just pleased that we are alright. It would’ve been problematic if we had ended up stuck inside their nest. The scent of our decaying corpses would’ve attracted predators and led them right for the lemmingshroos.”

“Oh… wonderful… now there’s a nice mental image…”

The alluring aroma of fried fish made Dani’s stomach cry out in plea. The boy turned to strut towards the campsite.

“Better get moving before the others start worrying over us.”

“Ah, wait Dani, before that… Could we perhaps keep this between us? About me and my issues, I mean. It would just make everyone needlessly worry. Please?”

Dani retorted with a comforting smile.

“Of course, it’ll be our little secret.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

Ejrica caught up to Dani with a few brisk paces. The pair walked the rest of their path side by side – two hearts beating a common rhythm, the song of strengthened empathy.



VERSE #26: WHAT I LACK

The distinct *squawk* of a seagull alerted Miste. She dove into a squat while pulling her sandwich against her chest. The greyish-white bird zoomed over her head and landed on the tiled pavement before her. The seagull let out another *squawk* in

disappointment and lifted back towards the skies, where a flock of its brethren was circling high above the town of *Jotel*.

Miste took a bite off her roast beef sandwich in triumph. She continued walking down the street whilst keeping a close eye for any other bold birds after her breakfast.

The town of Jotel resided on a sharp riverbank. Several distinct levels were carved within the sloping earth, each encompassing a single lengthy street curving along the shape of the river. The entirety of the town was covered in smooth grey stones embedded on the streets, with perfectly cubic houses made of matching stone. The river below was filled by tiny fishing boats with white sails, coming and going from the robust harbor at the lowest level of the town.

A light breeze washed through the streets of Jotel, carrying the scent of splashing water mixed with the pungent aroma of grass from the fields outside the town. The sense of freshness in the air was something deeply ingrained to the feel of Jotel, calming and homey.

Accompanying the endless sound of rushing water was the equally tireless screeching of seagulls echoing from the skies above, day in, day out. Miste had always assumed seagulls to be birds that would better thrive closer to the ocean – hence *sea* gull – but as it was evident, the local flock of birds was completely domiciliated, and more than used to humans, and rather shameless when searching for food.

Miste smiled and hummed in satisfaction, for even small things like this, bit by bit, served to broaden her perspective and teach her something new about the world: seabirds could get by anywhere, as long as there was plenty of food around.

The gang had reached the town upon the riverbank the day before. Their travels towards Magna Crux would continue as soon as the riverboat making its rounds between Jotel and the Capital would return from its latest voyage. That would still take a few more days, leaving the gang with ample time to sit back, relax, smell the grass, see the sights, get assaulted by gulls, and enjoy a slice of simple summertime in a tranquil town. One would be hard-pressed to find any trouble around these parts.

Miste was up early on her stroll through the town, the sun had barely risen to view. *Early* being a relative term, of course; Zeriah and Dani were still fast asleep when Miste had left the town inn, but Ejrica and Reiram had already disappeared way earlier to parts unknown.

The serenity of Jotel offered no disruptions to Miste's steps – aggressive seagulls naturally notwithstanding – and as such, her sightseeing soon led her to the far edge of town. The sharply rising riverbank was covered in lush green grass wavering with the winds. Atop the rise stood a scattered grove of hardy oak, creating a secluded and shady spot on the otherwise level steppe that extended far beyond the horizon.

Miste heard a noise coming from amidst the trees. It was barely there, overlaid by the rustling of leaves in the wind, but she recognized a sharp *whap* -sound repeating at a steady rhythm. The sound reminded Miste of Zeriah's blade cutting the air whenever he would practice his swordplay, though not quite the same. Drawn to the noise, Miste climbed up the grassy hill.

The sudden jog uphill after a filling breakfast was surprisingly tough, Miste found herself hauling her legs with all her vigor. She'd have to be careful, for a single misstep could send her

tumbling down the sharp riverbank and ending up in the stream below.

Miste stopped to take a breather once she reached the grove of oak at the top of the riverbank. In the midst of her own huffing, she noticed the *whap* -sounds growing more intense.

The source of the sound presented itself in the form of Ejrica standing at the opposite edge of the grove. From her firm stance, the exotic lady was flicking her legs high in the air, alternating between her left foot and right foot at even intervals. Each of her kicks packed enough power to create slicing gales, making strands of grass snap from the soil and flutter about in looping arcs.

After a moment, Ejrica began mixing her rhythm with rapid strikes and winding kicks, while taking controlled steps forward. She steadily revved up her pace, her kicks gaining more and more might. Once she truly got going, she added flavoring to her confident stride with an occasional cartwheel. Every single one of her movements was precise and firm; it was impressive to watch the exotic lady move in such effortless fashion.

Miste's soul blazed with revere for the strength of the martial artist. Her right hand crackled into an enthusiastic fist.

Ejrica really is something else! I wonder how long it took her to build all that poise?

Ejrica finished her acrobatic display with a pirouetting jump kick and landed back into a controlled stance, facing the exact direction that she had started with. She brought her form into a tight stand with her legs pressed together. A silent stream of air filled her lungs to the puffiest, before flowing outward in

matching silence. After relaxing her body from tension, Ejrica turned for Miste and arrived to meet her with brisk steps.

“Good morning, Miste. Is there something you need of me?”

“Morning, Ejrica. No, nothing in particular, just on a stroll, y’know. Sorry if I disturbed you.”

“Not at all, I was already finishing up.”

Ejrica walked past Miste and under the shade of a nearby oak. She grabbed a small ball-shaped flask from the root of the tree and splashed a generous dose of water over her face. She lifted her dark and curly hair slightly and gave her neck a washing rub.

After freshening up, Ejrica lowered to sit cross-legged under the tree. Even after what looked like an intense training regimen, the way Ejrica seated herself remained graceful and embodying eternal might.

The exotic lady picked up a neatly-folded paper package from the ground.

“Do you mind if I eat?”

“Sure, go ahead, I already had a snack myself.”

Miste dropped to sit next to Ejrica.

The package turned out to hold a sandwich exactly akin to Miste’s own breakfast. The way that Ejrica dug in hungrily for the first bite lifted a grin on Miste’s face; a good workout was sure to build up a healthy appetite.

“You like it?”

“I continue to be amazed by the complexity of flavors that Zirinian dishes provide with such simple ingredients.”

“So, you like it?”

“Very much so. The meat is so tender, it has absorbed so much flavor from pepper and herbs… though I can’t put my tongue on this… this musky tanginess with a twist of sweetness… what is that?”

“You mean the mustard?”

“This is mustard!? It tastes nothing like the ones we use in Serestria.”

“Ah, that’s because most Zirinian mustards are made using beer, instead of vinegar. The full-bodied aroma of the beer seeps into the mustard, giving it a unique flavor.”

“I see, fascinating. You seem to be quite knowledgeable on the subject of cooking, Miste.”

“Oh, no, no, no! Not me. I can’t cook to save my life. I’m merely *a gourmet* myself, hihihi…”

Miste rubbed her neck in a fit of embarrassment, a warm red tickling her cheeks.

“Sasha – my mom – she’s an awesome cook! Not awesome enough to make a disaster-in-the-kitchen like me to get any better, mind you, although she tried… oh man, did she try… I remember her mentioning about different kinds of mustards once, so that’s how I knew.”

Ejrica fell quiet for a moment, the dark ink within her eyes swirling in a somber splash. Miste nudged closer while reaching for her gaze.

“Ejrica…?”

Ejrica shook her head slightly and aimed a tiny smile at Miste.

“Your mother sounds wonderful. I’d very much like to meet her sometime and try her cooking.”

“She’s the best! I’m sure she’d like to meet you too. In fact, I think you two are quite similar.”

“Hmm? How so?”

“You’re both so strong and kind, and… pretty.”

Ejrica’s face jumped from surprise. She tilted her head in ponder.

“You… certainly don’t mince your words, Miste.”

“Hihihi, yea, I’ve never been one to hide what I think.”

“An admirable trait.”

“It’s just that whenever I look at you or Sasha, I feel like I’m looking at what I should strive for as a woman.”

Ejrica’s lips twitched wildly, like she was struggling to find words amidst her confusion.

“You grace me with such lofty praise, even though you barely know me?”

Miste gave the exotic lady a playful smirk while sticking her tongue out slightly.

“I know you well enough. I’m only stating what I can see plainly. Besides, Dani is super fond of you, and that’s enough people expertise for me.”

Ejrica was about to say something, though she quickly stopped herself by taking a hefty bite off her sandwich instead.

Miste pulled her legs against her chest and cradled herself into a tight bundle. The girl watched on as Ejrica kept chomping

down her sandwich. Her unhinged focus on her eating was like all else from the world had disappeared in an instant. The way Ejrica tried to mask her flusterment by stuffing her face made Miste giggle; Ejrica was the absolute worst at taking compliments.

“Hihi! That’s one good sandwich, huh?”

Ejrica spat a choking gurgle, coughing out bits and crumbs.

“Yes… it certainly is.”

As Miste continued aiming her giggly grin at Ejrica, she eventually caved in and burst out with a short laugh of her own. Ejrica’s expression settled on content beaming.

“I’m sorry, I guess I’ve yet to come fully accustomed to having such lively people around me.”

“No worries, you’ll have plenty of time to get used to us, for we ain’t going anywhere. But, it’s not like you’ve been all alone, right? What about Sakuya?”

“Well, I should have emphasized *around me*.”

Upon hearing her name coming up, the tiny astra in the form of a peculiar little lady fluttered into view from behind Ejrica.

“That was trying to be a joke, or what? On the fact that I live *inside* you, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“You really need work on your jesting skills, though I guess it wasn’t too bad for a beginner.”

“Well… thank you for the assessment… though who made you the joke police anyway?”

“Teehee, that’s way better already!”

Sakuya drifted under Ejrica's chin, brushing her softly as she went, like a cat begging for attention.

"I'm just happy to see my dear partner smiling."

The astra aimed a crafty eyeballing at Miste.

"Before we started traveling with you guys, *Miss Ice-Flower* here wouldn't show so much as a twitch of her lip at anything."

Ejrica reached to swat Sakuya aside, though the astral girl nimbly fluttered out of the way.

"Tch, what kind of an idiot would be grinning alone at absolutely nothing?"

"I'll tell you what kind: not a boring one!"

Ejrica sighed half-jokingly.

"Hopefully you're enjoying yourself now, Sakuya."

"Oh, I am!"

Sakuya drew a loop in the air and dived to nuzzle against Ejrica's chest in a fit of giggles.

"Aah… it's so wonderful, the way your heart throbs nowadays all funny-like, so warm and cozy, it makes me feel alive, I love it so!"

The corner of Ejrica's eye twitched from embarrassment, quickly worsened as her eyes met with Miste, who gave the lady a charmed stare. Ejrica bit down on her lip and averted her gaze while muttering under her breath.

"Sakuya… please…"

Miste reached out to Ejrica with a shake of her head.

“Don’t be shy, Ejrica. I think it’s awesome that you have someone who wishes to see you enjoying yourself, and in turn wants you to see her own happiness too. It’s beautiful… just like friends should be.”

Miste gazed at the blue alaxdrite embedded on the back of her right hand.

“I’ve talked with Yggdrazil only once, and even then it was brief. He wished for me to follow the path that would make me the happiest. Even though I know Yggdrazil is doing alright, I still have no idea why he’s trapped inside this alaxdrite, or how to help him. He didn’t seem to care about his own suffering, only thinking of how to guide *me*…”

Miste clenched her hand into a firm fist.

“…I swore that I would become the best Bearer I can be, to show Yggdrazil how much his trust means to me.”

Ejrica and Sakuya listened keenly as Miste spilled her thoughts. The tiny astra cradled herself against the lap of her partner.

“Hear that, Ejrica? You should appreciate me!”

“I do appreciate you, Sakuya.”

“Appreciate me more!!”

Ejrica sighed out a short chuckle. She gave Miste an encouraging nod.

“I believe Yggdrazil is fortunate to have someone so earnest and determined like you as his Bearer.”

“Thanks, that means a lot coming from a veteran Bearer like you.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m merely mirroring your honesty, and stating what I see plainly.”

Miste hopped to stand vigorously, and threw a firm smile at Ejrica. Her cheeks flickered with warmth. She suddenly felt confident making a request from the exotic martial artist; something that she’d been mulling for some time now.

“Ejrica, I… I’d like you to train me!”

“Train? How?”

“To fight like you. I want to grow stronger, and to be an awesome Astral Bearer, the kind that Yggdrazil deserves.”

“I don’t really… that’s… no, no, it wouldn’t be right, I myself still have so much growth ahead of me. I have no right to teach others with my lacking abilities.”

“Are you kidding me?! The way you move is on an entirely different level! Even half of your skill would be enough for me!”

“Even so… why… why do you ask this? I’ve watched you in battle, and you seem to be handling yourself rather well.”

Miste shook her head furiously.

“When I decided to become an Adventurer, I never thought I would be constantly ending up neck-deep in pickle-juice. I dreamed about seeing the world, so that I could understand it better, but I quickly came to realize how dangerous curiosity can be…”

Miste cringed as a flood of painful memories washed over her.

“When I fought Clint, it took every ounce of my strength just to barely emerge victorious. I’ve been thinking, when the next time comes, if I come across someone even more powerful,

someone who wants to hurt the people I love, what then? I can't just hope that things will work themselves out. I must work myself to expand my own limits. Yggdrazil has trusted me with this awesome power, it would be foolish of me to let it go to waste without seeing how much I can do."

Miste toughened up her gaze. Her cheeks burned as her passion kept bubbling forth.

"Please Ejrica, won't you help me?"

Ejrica returned Miste's stare with a weighty look, sizing up the spirit beaming from the girl. After a moment, she stood up to meet Miste's eyes directly.

"It seems you've put a lot of thought into this."

"Yeah! So, what do you say?"

"It would be rather heartless of me to refuse after bearing witness to your resolve. So be it, should you truly desire me as your tutor, I shall assist you in any way I can."

Miste's face erupted with glee.

"Thank you, Ejrica! Thank you, thank you! So, when do we start?"

"We'll start right now, there's no time like the present, after all."

"Huh? *Now*!? But didn't you just finish training yourself?"

"Don't worry about me, I still have plenty of vigor in me."

"I guess I should expect nothing less from you, Ejrica… Ah! Or should I be calling you *master*, or *teach*, or something like that from now on?"

“No, it would be insulting towards my own Master for me to adopt such a title, for I am but a novice myself. I’ll teach you all I can, but as a comrade helping another.”

“You’re so modest, Ejrica.”

Sakuya drew a loop around Ejrica’s neck while beaming her childlike smile.

“You can call *me* master if you like, Miste.”

“No, she won’t.”

Ejrica swatted past her ear to shoo the giggling astra away.

“Now then…”

Ejrica lunged at Miste, and began fondling and squeezing her arms and legs.

“Wha–What!? What are you…? Hey, hey! Whoaah! Gaah! Whe–Where do you think you’re touching…!?”

“You seem to have quite sufficient muscle mass, meaning we can skip strength training and move directly to improving your technique.”

“Oh… thanks… I think?”

“I should warn you though, I won’t be gentle – be prepared to push yourself unlike ever before.”

Miste’s eyes flared in response to the challenge. She would never let her heart waver, it was the least she could do on her road towards betterment.

“I’m ready! You’ll be surprised by my resilience!”

* * *

For numerous hours, a time that seemed to slip by in an instant, Ejrica taught Miste the ways of Serestrian martial arts. There was so much to learn, things that Miste had never even considered when fighting: the balance of her entire body, starting from the angle of her feet; the importance of keeping the right spots in her body either firm or bouncy; smooth yet steely movements; the correct breathing technique; among many other things. Individually, Miste was able to master all of Ejrica's lessons with no effort, though combining them into one unified whole proved to be much higher challenge.

"Your legs are too far apart!"

"S–S–Sorry!"

"You are making too broad movements – you'll waste energy like that!"

"Huff… Right, sorry!"

"Watch your landings! Always remember – flexible knees!"

"Gaah! I will, sorry!"

"Use your whole body as leverage, you'll tire your limbs if you draw strength only from them!"

"Whole body as leverage… got it, sorry!"

"Pay mind to the center of your mass. Every strike should leave you in perfect balance, otherwise you'll leave yourself open."

"Okay, I don't want to be left open, I'll remember that, sorry!"

Little by little, Miste's movements came to resemble Ejrica's example, although still years apart from her impeccable skill. Ejrica turned out to be an excellent teacher: precise, strict, demanding, pedantic even, yet never cruel. No matter how

many times Miste messed up her moves, Ejrica would always correct her right away, before prompting her to try again.

By the time the sun had risen to its highest, Miste was easily keeping up with Ejrica – she led the pair along a simple training sequence of strikes aimed at an imaginary foe. The exercise almost resembled a fiery dance, with its flowing and winding movements transitioning into brutal assaults combining a variety of kicks and punches.

As their movements continued merging into a synchronized display of power, Miste felt her body lulling into a trance-like state. Her entire being felt light, yet at the same time she could sense the crushing might of each one of her actions. The roughness in her motions smoothed, all converting into pure strength behind her delivery. The sharp flow of air in Miste's lungs entwined with the energy bubbling throughout her body to create a sensation resembling an armor of pure platidium forming around her. The sense of overwhelming power was intoxicating; Miste felt like she could go on for an eternity.

Eventually, Ejrica brought the exercise to a close and relaxed her body with a cleansing breath. Miste followed her example. Ejrica instructed Miste to stretch properly after training.

"There, that should do for the day."

"I can still go on, don't worry. Do your worst!"

"No, it won't serve any cause to destroy your body with too much work at once. Your body needs to gradually get used to the stress."

"I see, I'll trust you. Though I still feel full of energy."

Miste and Ejrica settled to rest under the shade of one of the oak trees surrounding their training spot. As Miste lowered to sit, all strength suddenly slipped away from her legs and she slammed hard on her butt. For the first time since starting her training, the true strain on her body began to materialize. Miste felt thick streams of sweat pouring down her back, and her limbs tingling like struck with countless needles.

“Ouch…”

“Tired?”

“Hihih… yea, kinda… I guess you know your stuff, Ejrica.”

“You did well for a first time. If we keep training diligently, I have no doubt you’ll grow powerful very fast.”

“Aww, thanks! It’s only because I had an awesome teacher.”

“I have to admit though, training with another person was… different.”

“Like… *good* different?”

“I had fun, I can’t put it better than that.”

A warm red blossomed across Miste’s cheeks. She aimed an energetic smile at Ejrica.

“How much better could you put it!? I had lots of fun too! Thank you, Ejrica.”

“You’re welcome.”

Miste’s pulse danced with insurmountable glee, for every day she lived, and every bond she forged with her friends, taught her something new. Each fresh experience brought her closer to her dream of being the best Adventurer, and the best Astral Bearer, that she could be.

Miste leaned against the mighty oak and hummed with satisfaction.

Sakuya appeared to droop over Ejrica's shoulder with a snarky grin.

"Hmmm… your heart is going all *ba-bumb* again, Ejrica. Just like with Dani…"

"S–Sakuya!"

"Huh? What's this about Dani?"

"Oh, not much. He and Ejrica just spent a nice morning together yesterday, that's all."

"Stop that, Sakuya! Y–You'll give Miste the wrong idea…"

"Wrong idea how? It was nice, no? The way you were all like *'Ah, Dani, your heartbeat felt so wonderful, it was unlike anything I've ever felt before'*, and stuff, teehee!"

Ejrica jumped upright while furiously swatting at the tiny astra.

"Gaah! Shut up, shut up!"

Miste leaned closer to the flustered Ejrica, with excitement sparkling in her eyes.

"Ooh, this story sounds kinda juicy."

"No, it doesn't!"

"Juicy like a nice steak!"

"Gaah! Noooooo! You have it all wrong!"

Ejrica kept swatting at her mischievous partner astra while Miste watched on, her laughter booming throughout the grove of oak.

* * *

Dani's enormous sneeze startled Zeriah.

"Whoa, that sounded quite bad… you alright?"

"All's fine, Big-Z. My room got so hot last night that I had to leave the window open. I guess I caught a bit of cold. Nothing that a bite of hot food can't fix though!"

"Sounds about right… Hrmpf, where is she…?"

"Mellow a bit, won't you. Mystic-M can't have gone too far."

"That's what I thought too – in a tiny town like this, we should've seen her already."

"There's no sign of Ejrica or Rei-Rei either, so I guess there are indeed quite a few hiding spots around here, heh."

"Tch, I would prefer if Miste didn't put so much effort into playing hide and seek. She could've at least said something before leaving."

"She's fine! This is Mystic-M we're talking about, after all. Why are you getting your trousers in a knot anyways?"

"There!!"

Zeriah and Dani had meandered through Jotel back and forth for over an hour now, looking for any sign of their missing companions. Ejrica and Reiram were prone to wandering on their own – not much to report there – but the way that Miste had left the inn without waking Zeriah first had left him in a lingering state of anxiety.

During the short time since Zeriah and Miste had departed from their hometown to see the world, the two youngsters had been put face to face with certain doom numerous times, making

Zeriah doubt his abilities to keep the person he loved safe. In this world, potential danger lurked behind every corner, and as such, every time that Zeriah couldn't tell exactly where Miste was made his gut churn with worry.

Now, to Zeriah's great relief, Miste was strolling towards him through the crowd, alongside Ejrica no less. The two girls were talking about something with great enthusiasm.

Zeriah and Dani sprinted to meet the pair of girls. Once Miste noticed Zeriah approaching, she gave him a cheery wave.

"Hi Zeri!"

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Huh? …Just looking around the town, and a bit beyond."

Dani parked himself decisively close to Ejrica and gave the exotic lady a sunny grin.

"What were you gals talking about? Seemed kinda interesting."

Ejrica shifted her gaze away from Dani.

"Nothing to do with you, I assure you."

Zeriah crossed his arms, turning his focus exclusively on Miste.

"You should have woken me up before you leave."

"Nah, you were sleeping so cozily, I didn't dare to disturb you."

"I don't like it when you roam alone."

"O——kay…? Wait… were you worried about me!? Hihihi, aww, thanks Zeri! Although you should just chill out, I'll be fine by myself. There's nothing to be scared of out here, except some seagulls trying to snatch my breakfast."

"Awesome that you're enjoying yourself…"

“It’s quite a relaxing town, don’t you think?”

Somehow, the way Miste beamed her cheery smile at him felt annoying to Zeriah. He turned away from the girl, staring aimlessly at the distance.

“I guess…”

Miste crept a bit closer and grabbed Zeriah by his sleeve while searching for his gaze.

“Is something wrong, Zeri? You seem upset.”

“Everything is fine, I just… huh… What’s that…?”

Zeriah noticed a fresh set of bruises decorating Miste’s arms. He grabbed Miste by her wrist to examine the gleaming red marks.

“What happened?!”

“It’s nothing, don’t worry. I was just training with Ejrica, and you know the sort of klutz I can be sometimes…”

“Training *what*?”

“Uhm… y’know, *training* – to become a stronger fighter.”

Zeriah slammed silent, for he didn’t know what to say. The entire time that he had been worrying over Miste, she had been practicing how to make that worry null and useless.

Miste must’ve realized it too… I’m not enough to keep her safe, I never have been…

Dani threw his arms behind his neck while leaning closer to Ejrica.

“Nice one Mystic-M, lucky you! Getting a private lesson from Ejrica… man, talk about getting jealous over here!”

Ejrica buried her face inside her palm.

“And for what possible reason would *you* be getting jealous…”

Miste pounded her chest proudly.

“You should totally be jealous! Ejrica is an awesome teacher, I’ve learned loooots already! I’ll show you guys later – look forward to it!”

“Hear that, Big-Z? We should probably double our efforts too, or what? With Mystic-M and Ejrica showing off, we don’t want to be left in the dust, right? Hehe!”

A demoralizing slither shook Zeriah’s entire being. After all his efforts training his swordsmanship, his skills were still those of a novice, barely. All he ever wanted to accomplish with his blade was to make Miste’s journey a safe one, so that she could focus on enjoying herself.

I’m… useless…

“Why, Miste?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you need to get stronger?”

“Um, strange question… I’d rather ask *Why not?* – but I guess one big reason is to ease your worry, Zeri, so that you can relax a bit.”

Miste’s confident smile pierced Zeriah’s chest like a gleaming-hot skewer. Zeriah glared at Miste in a manner that he never had before. His worry was withering from his heart, replaced by scorching anger.

“So, you’re just going to keep throwing yourself into danger, is that it!?”

“Huh…!? No… I mean, yeah, of course, if need be. What’s going on, Zeri? You’re acting all weird.”

“Yea, sure, *I’m* acting weird…”

“What?”

“Fine, do whatever you wish, see if I care!”

“Why are you–”

“All I’ve tried to do is keep you out of harm’s way – not that it matters to you at all!”

“Zeri…”

“Why do you think it’s always your job to help everyone you meet, no matter how dangerous that might be? That is so like you; you always just run in blindly and get yourself into trouble and make us all worry!”

“Well… I… that’s exactly why I train, so that I can handle myself!”

“Yeah, good, do that, not like I’m here or anything!”

“For your information, the world is full of unexpected things, and you can’t always protect me–”

“Yeah, I know that full well! That’s why *you* should keep your wits and–”

“I *am* keeping my wits! I realize that traveling is dangerous! The life of an Adventurer is ripe with danger, and I certainly don’t have the luxury to be a damsel in distress! I’m *soooo* terribly sorry for trying to better myself!”

“Don’t waste your apologies on me, it’s not like you really mean it! Every time you do something like this, you apologize, and then you just do it all over again!”

Dani attempted nudging between Zeriah and Miste. The couple's arguing was attracting quite the number of eyes passing by.

"Whoa! Easy! Chillax you guys…"

Neither of them heard a thing.

"I wasn't really apologizing just now! It was sarcasm!"

"Tch, trying to understand you sometimes is like putting together a puzzle with a piece or two missing."

"Oh, real smooth! That'll get us somewhere!"

"And where exactly are we going anyway? I'll tell you where: headfirst into trouble because of your whims!"

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, no one is forcing you!"

"Great! I don't want to!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

"Super fine!"

"I know it's fine!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

"FINE!!!"

Miste's scream was like thunder rumbling from clear blue sky. The girl circled past Zeriah and dashed down the street. Her pitiful sobbing echoed away fast before disappearing amidst the bustle of the town.



Zeriah began marching to the opposite direction, away from the perplexed gazes surrounding him.

“Wait, Big-Z! Where are you going?!”

Dani did his best to reach out to Zeriah, but the beaten swordsman heard nothing.

Dani and Ejrica shared a look amongst themselves, embodying all their worry and confusion.

“What the hell was that about?”

“I wish I knew…”

* * *

Zeriah had to spent a better part of an hour alone, pacing the lower streets of Jotel from end to end, before his thoughts finally settled fully.

During his spat with Miste, Zeriah's mind had gone numb, all the while his deepest feelings of anger and frustration simply poured out unhinged. Not like he hadn't meant what he had said, but the way he *presented* it was less than constructive. Miste wasn't the one Zeriah was angry with – it was himself! He was angry at his own worthlessness, his lacking as a man, and his utter failing to live up to the image of a protector which he strived towards.

The young swordsman returned to the town inn with his resolve crumbled into brittle little pieces.

Miste was crying… it's all my fault… and yet I dare claim myself to be worthy of her…? What a joke!

Zeriah marched to the upper floor of the inn, his head drooping in the darkest of sulks. When Zeriah reached the door of the room shared by him and Miste, he stopped for a moment.

I must apologize, there's nothing else to do!

While reaching for the doorknob, Zeriah's anger surged inside his head, crushing his skull from the inside.

I'll apologize… and then… what? Everything will return to life as usual? I'll remain the same useless sack of shit as before? Miste will keep pushing towards further glory… while I get left behind… just like the overzealous, unwanted trash that I am…

Zeriah pulled his hand away from the door, disgusted at himself.

Returning the way I am won't do any good! If I'm to ever know true peace and achieve my dream, I need to work myself to the bone, instead of whining! Yes, that's it…

Zeriah marched to the far end of the hallway, to Reiram's room. The door had been left narrowly ajar.

Inside, Reiram's wide-brimmed hat was resting on his pillow, accompanied by a crumbled mess of blankets strewn and twisted into a funny-looking worm. A tiny movement under the blankets greeted Zeriah upon him stepping into the room.

"Reiram?"

Zeriah got no reply, except further wiggling within the sheets.

"Come on Reiram, I need to talk to you. I know you can hear me."

"A rather strange choice in couples counselor, eh, Big-Z?"

Zeriah jumped back in surprise as the voice from underneath the wide-brimmed hat sounded completely different from Reiram's gruff note, way too boyish and quirky.

Dani rose to sit on the bed, adjusting Reiram's hat to rest atop his head. He broke into stretching yawning.

"Yo, you're finally back! Did you talk to Mystic-M yet?"

"Dani!? What are you doing here?"

"Duh, taking a nap."

"No, I mean why are you *here*, in Reiram's room."

"I let Mystic-M borrow my room."

"Why…?"

"She felt it would be better if you two took the rest of the day off from each other, so I offered her my room as a retreat spot. Man, I tell ya, I've never seen Mystic-M this upset."

Zeriah turned to look away in embarrassment.

“I didn’t mean to get you guys involved…”

“It’s okay – I bet you didn’t mean quite a lot of other things either, right? You should go and make up. What was all that about anyway?”

“It’s about what I lack. I have to make things right. Until I do, I’m not worthy of showing my face to Miste.”

“Uhm… okay… you officially lost me.”

A gruff bellow arrived from the doorway, startling both Zeriah and Dani.

“Tch, I can’t recall a time when you would’ve been entirely *found*.”

Reiram strutted into the room. The elder Adventurer walked past Zeriah and snatched his hat off Dani’s head. The man gave his younger colleague a sharp smack on the back of his head, sending the boy slamming face first on the floor.

“I already told you about the hat!”

“Sorry, Rei-Rei…”

Dani flipped himself to lie sideways on the floor while smirking with calm poise, almost too smooth and cool considering the beating his brain had just received… on the other hand, this was *Dani*, so never mind.

“Your hat smells strangely nice – warm and homey – what is that? Some kind of cologne? Or is it the material?”

“It’s the scent of closing death…”

“Alright, hint taken.”

Dani shrugged with easygoing glee. He rolled backwards and back on his feet with a single springy motion.

“So, what did you need from Rei-Rei anyways, Big-Z?”

Zeriah was still a bit flustered over the sudden ruckus that had unfolded around him.

“Right… I… uh… Reiram, I wanted to ask something–”

“You made yourself quite the talk of the town today, Zeriah.”

“Y–You heard already…!?”

Reiram dropped to sit on the edge of his bed.

“I bumped into Ejrica; she told me what happened. It’s quite rare to see a Serestrian warrior confused and upset over someone’s stupidity like that, but my, you managed to pull it off somehow. Well done, Zeriah, excellently screwed up.”

“I know that I screwed up, okay! You don’t have to be such a jerk about it…”

“If you don’t like me being a jerk, then don’t give me a reason, kiddo. You had something to ask me? Make it hasty so I can finally get some peace and quiet around here.”

Zeriah truly hoped that there had been some other way – a path for him to reach his goal without resorting to Reiram’s help. His pride had already suffered significant blows during the last few weeks, as he had repeatedly come face to face with reality. He feared that admitting to his powerlessness directly, in the presence of the much more experienced and skilled swordsman, would make his confidence collapse irreparably, leaving him as a spiritless husk. Zeriah’s whole body stiffened as he forced out his request.

“I… I want you to help me train, Reiram. I need to get stronger, and fast!”

Dani ruffled his frizzy hair in puzzlement.

“What does that have to do with you and Mystic-M patching things up?”

“Miste is right about everything, she understands the situation we’re both in. I’ve let myself slack off; I’ve been a fool to assume things will simply work themselves out. I swore to keep Miste safe, and yet I’ve broken that promise time and time again with my lack of ability. That’s why–”

Reiram waved his hand dismissively.

“I won’t do it.”

“What!? Why!?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

Dani laid a somewhat surprised eyeballing on Reiram.

“That’s kinda harsh, Rei-Rei. Big-Z is honestly asking for help. You shouldn’t just brush him off right away.”

“Why should I bother? None of this has anything to do with me – not the lovers’ spat, nor the fragile ego of a failed swordsman. I have better things to do than play with some kid who clearly doesn’t even know what he wants.”

A tiny moment of silence settled inside the room.

Zeriah’s knuckles crackled into fists, breaking the calm.

“The hell do you know about what I want…!?”

Fire filled Zeriah’s lungs. His voice cracked slightly as he roared out in vicious tone.

“All I’ve ever desired is to be Miste’s strength, her shield, so that she can follow her own dreams free and safe! Don’t you dare

belittle that, you hear me, Reiram! If you don't want to merely help me, that is absolutely fine, I wasn't expecting any favors!"

Zeriah brought out a wallet from within his vest and tossed it on Reiram's bed.

"I'll hire you as my teacher, sound fair? Money isn't an issue, so name your price."

Reiram looked at the pouch filled with coin like one would look at a rancid piece of meat. The man took the wallet in his hand, and hurled the thing back at Zeriah. The wallet slammed against Zeriah's chest hard enough to squeeze his lungs dry of air. Zeriah fell on one knee while gasping for breath.

Reiram rose to stand, looming over the boy while laying a condescending stare upon him.

"If you want to hire an Adventurer, you can leave a request at the Guild, maybe someone will have you – I certainly won't. I may be a sellsword, but I decide myself to whom I sell my services, kiddo."

Reiram kept pouring his dominance down at Zeriah a few moments longer in silence. Slowly, the gravity in his gaze softened, turning into something that resembled amusement.

"…Tell you what, I won't become your teacher, but if you truly wish to slam your head against a brick wall, then I guess I can spare an hour to smack you around. Say… tomorrow at dawn, on the field at the southern end of the town?"

Zeriah had to fight through his wheezing to respond.

"Fine… it's… a date…"

"Excellent, I'll see you then. Now scram, both of you!"

Zeriah wobbled to stand and marched out of the bedroom. Dani followed after him, boosted by Reiram kicking his rear to drive him out. The door clicked firmly shut behind the two boys.

Dani dropped his hand over Zeriah's shoulder.

"Big-Z, are you alright? Don't take this the wrong way, but you seem kinda *off*, y'know. This ain't like you."

"I'm fine… You can use my room if you want, Dani, I won't be needing it."

Zeriah headed to leave the inn.

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think… To train!"

* * *

The fields south of Jotel were void of movement and near silent as death. Only the tiniest swish of wind rustled through grass, assuring the lone swordsman that the vista before him was truly part of reality, instead of a painting created by the liveliest of brushstrokes.

Zeriah marched underneath the shade of a lonely and ancient oak tree, with mighty branches of flourishing green fanning out imposingly towards the heavens, almost mockingly so, for the tree alone broke the otherwise perfectly level field of grass. The secluded spot suited Zeriah fine, there would be nothing to distract him.

The burning sun was slowly sinking towards the western horizon, pulling behind it a veil of soft indigo to cover the skies by the coming of eventide. The days of midsummer in northern Zirinia were long by nature. Zeriah would still have plenty of time to train.

He drew his weapon in single-blade configuration, placing the platidium-forged blade before him. A face greeted him inside the metal's reflection, one belonging to a sorry excuse of a swordsman, weak and listless. Zeriah focused intently to channel all of his self-loathing into determination, letting it blaze through his eyes. Two orbs of lime-green fire lit up inside the metal.

Satisfied, Zeriah drilled his stance firmly against the soil and raised his sword above his head with both hands. He took a deep breath to cleanse his mind, and focused on a single thought.

For Miste…

A divide of air made the grass flutter as Zeriah brought his weapon down with all his might.

The strike was sharp, firm, and perfectly stable, a textbook execution. And yet, something that minor was the bare minimum to be expected from someone who had spent years practicing his craft. A single perfected maneuver was nothing, it meant nothing, absolutely nothing… What Zeriah needed was skill and strength beyond the realm of normal human comprehension. He needed to become so powerful that the entire world would bend down before the might of his blade. Only then would he find peace of mind.

Zeriah began slicing the air repeatedly, pouring everything he had to each and every swing. He had no real way to further his *skill* all by himself, but *strength* on the other hand was something he could pursue alone.

Strike after strike, Zeriah kept swinging at his imaginary foe. A hundred strikes, a thousand strikes, an hour, slipping into two, then three… beyond that, all things countable in the world

became a blur to him. Zeriah succumbed under a spell, he was merely a puppet to his heart's desires, and his heart wasn't about to let him stop.

Miste has watched me for so long… and I'm still the same as all those years ago, weak… she must be so disappointed in me… I can't blame her…

A river of sweat turned into a waterfall, lathering him all over, making his clothes saggy and cold. Bolts of lightning lashed up and down his arms, screaming for him to stop, a plea falling on deaf ears. Pain meant nothing. Zeriah would rather die than let himself rest.

Eventually, the last light from the sun flickered out, leaving Zeriah to continue his training within cool twilight.

A thumping sensation on his right arm made Zeriah cringe. The thin white scar from his duel with Kaidou tended to act up from time to time. The constant stings of agony kept digging at the deepest corners of Zeriah's mind, unearthing a collection of painful memories…

Zeriah's eyes turned hazy from exhaustion. Suddenly, a dark figure morphed into existence before him. The apparition, holding a paper-thin sword, lunged at Zeriah with impossible speed. He took a wild swing at the opposing weapon, making the mirage to dissipate back into nothingness.

The sudden hallucination broke Zeriah's rhythm. He stopped to catch his breath, and at the same instant felt how the gnawing sensation of agony doubled its efforts to bring him down. Zeriah had to return to his swinging right away, otherwise he would collapse under the crushing hurt.

Kaidou was my first true opponent, no punches pulled… One would stand, the other would perish… In the end, Miste had to bail me out… If I had been alone, it would've been the end for me…

Zeriah's tempo grew steadily in fury, and his sword swings became chaotic. The blisters on his palms kept bursting open one after the other. Zeriah tried fighting past the burning on his palms by wrapping his hands ever-harder around the handle of the sword. Squeezing down on the weapon, knuckles white, with his hands covered in open wounds made Zeriah tear up.

He dropped his sword to the ground as his hands began to shake, quickly spreading throughout his entire body. The cumulative hurting forced out a gurgled scream from him. He picked up his weapon from the ground, managing to barely hold it in his grasp.

While wiping his tears, Zeriah saw a new mirage forming before him. A slender woman, walking towards him with icy fury. Zeriah stumbled backwards and crashed on his back upon seeing the form of Rio coming at him. The woman's nail-like blade pierced Zeriah's heart, or it would have, as the mirage dissipated upon touching him.

A freezing lick brushed along Zeriah's spine as the unmistakable voice of Rio echoed through his head.

"*I'll kill you…*"

Zeriah scrambled around, finding Rio standing right behind him. Her pink lips curved into a demented smile. She lifted her sword up high. The blade of an executioner fell down towards Zeriah, cutting him in half, if only in his imagination.

The mirage dissipated yet again, leaving Zeriah whimpering from the shock. He could've sworn Rio was truly there.

“I’ll kill you…”

Rio’s voice kept echoing around Zeriah, reaching for him at once from everywhere and nowhere. Zeriah got up while glancing around nervously, trying to find the ghostly image of the woman.

If Dani hadn’t come to my rescue back then… Rio would have ended me… I made a promise to Miste that I would return safely… I would have broken my promise…

A slicing pain on Zeriah’s right wrist made him loose his grip on his sword. Similar cuts exploded on his knee, his chest, his ankle, and his back. His body was finally about to give in, no matter how hard he fought, he couldn’t stop the crippling pain from overtaking him.

Zeriah slumped on his knees. A gush of tears filled his vision.

Rio’s sword appeared to hover in front of Zeriah. He could feel the woman’s icy aura gripping him from behind. The razor-sharp metal kept drawing closer to Zeriah’s face, he had no strength left to resist.

I’m so sorry… Miste…

The blade pressed against Zeriah’s eyes, and with a single swift motion turned his world into endless darkness.

* * *

“Big-Z!? Yo! Big-Z!!? Are you okay!? Oh, I think he’s sleeping.”

Zeriah was awakened by gentle poking against his cheek.

“Hunh…? Wha… Dani?”

Zeriah climbed up to sit. The grass underneath him was moist from morning dew, glistening in the earliest rays of the sun.

I fell asleep mid-training… no, it was more like I utterly collapsed…

Dani helped Zeriah on his feet. It was rare to see Dani with anything less than his usual energetic grin, but right now, the smile that he beamed at his friend was drenched in worry, framed with firm support.

“Dude, don’t tell me you spent the whole night here!”

Zeriah could scarcely hold himself up. Every single one of his nerves were on fire. It felt like there was an iron bar slammed right through his spine.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

A set of imposing stomps arrived at the scene a bit after Dani. Reiram marched past the two boys, dropping an appraising scowl at Zeriah.

“A rather quirky perception of *fine*.”

Zeriah didn’t bother answering. He scooped up his sword off the ground; stretching for the weapon made his knees wobble.

Reiram settled near the root of the great oak. The elder Adventurer drew his edge-rifle from the holster on his back and gave his weapon a few confident swipes through the air.

“Right then, here we are. I hope you’ve had enough beauty sleep, although you look like you could use a couple more winks… We’ll begin at your ready, Zeriah.”

Dani stepped in front of Zeriah with calming gesturing.

“I don’t mean to sound discouraging, Big-Z, but Rei-Rei has a point. You look like you’ve been hit by a train – twice! We should probably skip sparring for now.”

Zeriah pushed Dani aside, pacing towards Reiram with wobbly steps.

“I said I’m fine!”

Zeriah had dueled with Reiram once before. It was a few weeks ago, in the town of Llyra, shortly after he and Miste had first departed on their journey. Thinking back made Zeriah shake his head in disbelief – when did all that time slip through his fingers?

From his past experience, Zeriah knew full well that he was no match to Reiram. Their last duel had eventually ended in Zeriah’s victory, but only due to trickery on his part. It didn’t really matter though, for their sparring wouldn’t be a matter of victory or defeat; Reiram was simply the only person whom Zeriah could practice his swordplay with.

Zeriah steeled his stance to the best of his ability, although the hollow burning that lingered on his skin and the wobble in his knees did their best to bring him down.

“Here I come! I won’t go easy on you, so be prepared for my worst!”

Reiram dropped his rifle-greatsword-mix into a low stance. A nonchalant grunt slipped past his lips. The man threw a stern look at his opponent, calling the boy to do exactly what he had promised.

Zeriah dashed towards the elder swordsman and swung his blade for a horizontal slash. Reiram lifted his own weapon up to his waist to catch the incoming metal, all the while taking an agile step around Zeriah. The man found his way behind the boy and gave him a firm kick to his lower back. Zeriah went tumbling forward and collided with the oak.

“Come on now – even from you that was pathetic!”

Zeriah had to take a few seconds to collect himself after his intimate meeting with the trunk of the tree. At the moment, pain meant nothing to him, he would add it to the collection, simple as that – more pressing was the fact that the wobble on his knees was climbing up towards his head, making the world before him twist and waver nauseatingly.

“Come, come, we don’t have all day.”

Zeriah turned to meet the snarking man.

“I’ll show you…!”

After taking half a step towards Reiram, Zeriah’s knees gave in. All feeling escaped from his legs and he fell down to kneel. He managed to stop himself from slamming face first into the soil by sticking his sword against the ground for support. The world kept turning and crashing from side to side, like he was stranded on a boat in the middle of a stormy lake.

A shadow appeared to loom over Zeriah. He turned to gaze up, finding Reiram standing before him. The man’s eyes were filled with judgmental gleam.

“I’m waiting – show me your strength.”

“I’m done…”

“What was that? I couldn’t quite catch that.”

Zeriah was way over his limit; he had been for a good while now. He felt like if he moved another inch he would crumble on the spot, dissipate into fine dust, and get blown away by the winds.

“I said I’m done… this is it for me…”

Right then, something that Zeriah had yet to see twitched at the corner of Reiram's lip: frustration, growing fast to fill the man's sky-blue pair of eyes with rage. Zeriah flinched, for even a tiny expression of honest anger from the usually cool-as-cucumber man was enough to send chills down his spine.

Reiram yanked Zeriah by his collar and brought the boy to his level. His eyes drilled the boy with the intensity of a ravenous beast on chains.

"You piss me off to no conceivable end!"

Reiram gave Zeriah a firm shook. The boy had no strength to fight back.

"Where the hell is all your bravado from the time back in Llyra?! All that talk about protecting Miste, about how you would never give up, come what may, what happened to all that?! Or was it just talk?!!"

Zeriah averted his gaze, he didn't dare to look at the condemning fire pouring from Reiram's eyes.

"You damned punk…!!"

Reiram slammed his right fist squarely on Zeriah's face. The boy flew on his back, with a splash of blood filling his mouth. Even amidst all of Zeriah's collective aching and numbing, Reiram's punch managed to stand out with monstrous intensity.

"Get up!!"

Reiram's bellow was like a hypnotizing lure, Zeriah had no choice but to make an effort to move – yet in the end he managed little more than pitiful twitching in place.

"I said get up!!!"

Reiram yanked Zeriah to stand once again, only to send him back on the ground with another punch.

As Reiram was about to go in for a triple-dip, Dani caught the man by his shoulder.

“That’s enough! Stop it, Rei-Rei!”

“Let go of me!”

“This doesn’t help anyone!”

“Zeriah wanted a lesson, and I’m giving him one!”

Zeriah – hammered in body and spirit – managed to form a frail sound with his cracked-open lips.

“It’s alright, Dani, I deserve all that’s coming to me…”

Reiram lunged at Zeriah once more.

“Tch, don’t you go starting with any of that shit!!”

Dani slipped between the two, slamming his palm against Reiram’s chest to stop him from moving.

“I said that is enough!! Now everybody just take a chill-pill!! Especially you, Rei-Rei, otherwise you’ll be fighting me next!!”

Lying on the ground, Zeriah couldn’t see Dani’s face as he stood against Reiram – the things he would have given for a glimpse at the young Adventurer’s expression…

Reiram took a decisive step back, extending his arms outward as a sign of peace.

Dani turned towards Zeriah, beaming his trademark innocently sunny grin. He offered his hand for his friend.

“Grab on, Big-Z.”

Dani helped Zeriah up on his wobbly feet, placing the weary swordsman to lean over his shoulder. The pair hobbled slowly to the great oak. Dani laid Zeriah to rest by the root of the tree.

“There, that’s better.”

Dani rummaged through his pouches and brought out a set of medical supplies. He began eagerly treating Zeriah’s wounds.

Zeriah lifted his arm to cover his face.

“You don’t have to do that.”

Dani swatted the arm aside.

“If you won’t let me patch you up, I’ll have Rei-Rei knock you unconscious first. It’s your call, Big-Z.”

He said all of it with a smile.

Zeriah decided not to resist further and allowed Dani to do his thing. Soon enough, the young Adventurer was done, finishing his treatment with a shot of strange liquid through Zeriah’s arm.

“Hold still, this’ll sting just a bit… and… there. Don’t worry, it’s just some medicine to hasten your recovery, it’s perfectly harmless.”

“Thanks…”

“Don’t mention it. I hope to see you returning to your normal self soon.”

Zeriah slouched against the trunk of the great oak.

“I don’t know if that’s possible… Tch, what even is *normal* anyway…”

Dani gave his friend a poke on the forehead.

“Bah, now that’s just the drugs making you talk all silly.”

“I thought you said it’s harmless.”

“It is… most of the time…”

Zeriah sneered at the joke, it was the closest to a laugh he could manage.

Reiram walked next to the two boys, standing in calm silence. Dani beamed a crafty grin at the man.

“And how about over there, all nice and chill?”

“Don’t waste your worry on me.”

“Sounds about right coming from you, Rei-Rei! Hehe!”

A gust of wind washed over the fields of grass, carrying a touch of glimmering dust to flutter around the trio. With a gathering twirl, the dust came to form the outline of an ethereal woman. Freyja emerged from the midst of the glimmer. The lady astra fluttered to sit beside Zeriah, giving him a look filled with maternal warmth.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m… alright, I guess.”

“I’m sorry for Reiram, he–”

Reiram was quick to cut Freyja off.

“Do not apologize on my behalf! I have done nothing to feel sorry for.”

“You’re impossible sometimes!”

Zeriah shook his head calmingly at Freyja.

“No, Reiram is right. In fact, I probably could use a bit more of roughing up.”

“Zeriah…”

Freyja’s iridescent aura grew to surround Zeriah with its soothing gleam. The lady astra kept shooting Reiram with a dirty look, which the man assertively disregarded.

Dani dropped himself sideways to rest lazily over the grass.

“Now that we’re all gathered here nice and chill, would you finally tell us what’s really wrong, Big-Z? You’re not being yourself.”

Zeriah wouldn’t even know where to start.

Only precious little isn’t ‘wrong’… I’ve failed Miste’s trust, I was horribly mean to her, and I got everyone else worrying…

Dani snapped his fingers within an inch from Zeriah’s face as he began to space out.

“Yo, Big-Z, stay with us! Come on, dude, whatever it is between you and Mystic-M, it can always be fixed. Talk to us, we want to help.”

“It has nothing to do with Miste… I mean… it’s not her fault, it’s all me. I got frustrated at myself and ended up lashing at her. I… no… it doesn’t matter anymore; she must hate me by now…”

“Now, now, I have to let Rei-Rei wail on you again if you keep talking dumb stuff like that. Mystic-M doesn’t hate you! Just take it slow and tell us what’s on your mind, what really is the problem here, cos honestly, I’m still a bit confused.”

Freyja fluttered close to Dani, so that the two of them could stare down Zeriah in unison.

“Please Zeriah, talk to us.”

“Yea, come on, Big-Z!”

Reiram turned his back at the scene while crossing his arms.

“Tsk, I’m far too old for this… what a bother… Just so you know, we aren’t leaving until this matter has been settled.”

Zeriah leaned into the oak; he had been pressed firmly against a wall. He turned his gaze up, towards the canopy of deep green above him, and allowed his mind to sink within the deepest places in his heart. From the bottomless well of bloody tears that he had shed along his path towards his dream, Zeriah unleashed honesty to gush forth.

“I… I’m mad at myself… because I’ve come to realize that… even with all my efforts… I’m still the same person who I was all those years ago…”

VERSE #27 FLASHES FROM MY PAST: DREAM YET UNREALIZED

“One of my most vivid childhood memories is me sitting by the veranda of our family villa, under the shade of a large oak that grows nearby. I would spend hours in silence, by myself, simply staring at the horizon, past the hills blooming with white roses, and waiting.

I remember jumping out of joy once I saw two people arriving from beyond the hills. I rushed to meet them with all the speed that a stubby-legged seven-year-old could muster.

Dad had been gone on a trip down south for a month or so, and he had taken my older brother, *Kai*, along with him – it was his first time away from our hometown of Akrelion. Without Kai around, I had felt lonely, so finally seeing him again overwhelmed me with emotion. I think I even cried a bit.

I made the maddest of dashes straight for Kai and wrapped myself around him, acting all needy. I bet that Kai was tired after the long trip, and from walking for half a day straight, and yet he simply smiled and laughed; he was happy to see me as well. He even gave me a piggyback ride back to our house, while answering my endless questions about his journey.

I always saw my brother as the coolest person in the world! He was… no, he *is* everything I hope to be. If only I could one day measure up to the unwavering spirit he showed me…

* * *

Long before either Kai or I would set foot on this world, our parents spent their time traveling across the northern regions of Zirinia, prospecting for earth rich with alaxdrite.

Mom and dad had studied at the same university in Magna Crux. They had met on the first day of school, fallen fast in love, and supported each other throughout their years of studies. They were both students at the geology department, specializing in *mineralogy*, with the hopes of advancing the booming rise of *alax-tech* that was sweeping across the continent.

Eventually, their search for new ore deposits led them near Akrelion, where they finally lucked out big time. They were overjoyed, for their massive find would certainly help the expansion of alax-tech by offering the industry more fuel to play with. Moreover, as the law stated that any fresh deposits were the property of their discoverers, after selling their claim, mom and dad became rich – like filthy rich!

They decided to settle down in Akrelion, near the newly-founded alaxdrite mine, and built the rest of their lives there.

They could've simply retired – loaded and carefree – but they decided to instead continue researching the properties of alaxdrite on their own. They'd often get invited to offer consultant work all across Zirinia after making a huge name for *The Couple Walz* within their academic community.

* * *

I can't recall a time when either Kai or I would have been forced to push ourselves to gain something. We had pretty comfortable lives, quite literally handed to us on a pre-paid silver platter. I can't say for sure, but I think that's at least partly why I never felt like putting much effort into anything. I did well in school, or rather adequate, but that was it, nothing more. I was never good at anything, nor did I have any interests to call my own. I simply drifted through my years, waiting for school days to pass so that I could spend time with Kai again. My own existence was truly a wasteful one.

Being a small town, there weren't that many kids in Akrelion. As such, all the classes were combined into a single unit, with every age group mixed together. Everybody knew one another, by face at least. I never really got along with anyone, or rather decided to keep my distance. I didn't see much use for excess friends.

Kai on the other hand was a different case. It happened slowly over the years – he would always be the first one to step in if someone got bullied, he'd break off fights, help others with difficult homework, as well as assist the teachers with anything they'd need. In the end, Kai became a sort of big brother for the entire school, to every one of us. He didn't have to do any of it, he simply wanted to.

I was kinda wimpy as a kid, frail and sensitive, now that I think back it's actually really embarrassing. Back then I would cry my eyes out from any tiny nick or scratch. Luckily, Kai was always there to lift me back on my feet.

"Come on, Zeriah, it's not that bad, you'll be fine."

"Sorry… *sniffle* I'm… such a loser…"

"No, you're not! Just remember to use that pain to toughen yourself up. You're alive after all, so it's not a big deal, right?"

"Right…"

Kai would always ruffle my hair and press me against his chest whenever he wanted to comfort me.

"I'll be here, Zeriah, so you got nothing to worry about. Let's make a deal: I'll protect you for as long as I can, so that you can one day become strong and in return protect someone else. Can you do that for me?"

"I guess… I'll try…"

"That's my bro!"

Kai was always so kind and firm in his actions. He was the only friend I needed. I love him, in ways impossible to explain.

I recall this one time that our whole class went into spastic panic when a venomous snake managed to slither its way into the classroom; I'm talking girls screaming, guys falling off their chairs, the whole thing. Kai was the only one who kept his cool. He picked the snake up with his ruler and carried it outside, as if the whole thing was nothing to him.

Naturally, Kai got a heap of praise from everybody in town for what he did. That was, except for mom. Once mom heard about

what had happened in school that day, she utterly flipped. I had never seen her like that. She kept crying and shouting, and making threats at the school of all things. She even came close to hitting Kai, for supposedly *acting selfish*. Even the slightest chance that something could've happened to me or Kai made mom lose her marbles. Dad managed to talk her down eventually, though I remember being a bit on the edge for at least a week after the event.

Late that night, I talked with Kai before going to sleep. I asked why he wasn't scared of the snake, though in truth, he was never scared of anything.

"It's alright to be scared sometimes, but if everybody gets scared, then nothing will get done, right? That's why I have to stay strong, in case that I'm left as the last line of defense, get it?"

"I guess so."

Kai was holding his calm and confident smile, a thing I sometimes imagined to be simply drawn over his face, for it never wavered. And yet, beyond that, there was something swirling inside him, like he was mulling over something huge.

"Zeriah… I will keep protecting everyone for as long as I can. I just hope that others will remember what I've done, even after I'm not around anymore. Like… I wish the things I do will have more effect than simply right here and now… uh, it's hard to explain."

"No, I think I get it, bro."

"Well, you've always been quick on the uptake, hehe!"

Although we were brothers, our motives were worlds apart.

One day after school, I saw Kai sneaking into the woods near our house. In my curiosity, I decided to follow him. It wasn't like him to wander off without telling someone first.

I found Kai at a small glade deep in the woods. He had a rugged stick with him, and he was swinging it through the air in an almost dancelike sequence. He seemed super concentrated; I had rarely seen him wearing a stern face like he did. From what I could gather, he had been doing this for a while now, his moves were smooth and coordinated.

"What are you doing, Kai?"

I had been better at hiding my presence than I thought, as Kai got startled enough to drop his stick. He turned towards me, the seriousness on his face melting into his usual calm smile.

"Ah, it seems I've been found. Guess it was inevitable."

"What is all this? Are you playing without me…?"

"Nuh-uh, I'm practicing swordplay."

"…where did you learn to do it so well?"

"Heh, gee, thanks! Honest feedback is always welcome. Good to know it resembles something cohesive, hehe!"

Kai invited me to sit with him near the edge of the glade.

"Remember that trip I went with dad a while back?"

"Of course I do, how could I forget!? You were gone for so long, I thought you'd never return."

"The thing is, I met someone on that trip. There was this awesome person in Bosower, a former captain of the Knights of Minerva. I asked him to teach me how to fight, and ended up

learning the basics, all that I could whenever I managed to sneak away from dad unnoticed."

"Dad doesn't know!?"

"Nope, I wouldn't risk telling him, he'd tell mom, and you know how she'd react."

"Yeah… she'd flip! But why? Why did you want to learn something like that?"

"You don't think sword fighting is cool in an' of itself?"

"Ha-ha, I'm serious!"

"I simply saw an opportunity and took it. You see, I've been thinking for a while now about what I wanna do with my life. I've decided to join the Knights of Minerva, I'll apply the moment I turn seventeen."

"That sounds like a nice fit for you."

"Yeah, I'm thinking the same… that's why I won't tell mom and dad, not until the time is right. Dad is not really the issue, but rather mom… she… she just wouldn't get it."

Kai caught a fistful of grass and tossed it lazily forward.

"Mom wants us both to go to university once school is over, to get a high education, to have grand careers, just like she and dad did. That kind of life is fine an' all, but it's just not for me… it's not *me*."

Kai bounced on his feet and marched across the clearing while picking up his stick.

"I got two perfectly good hands and a working pair of legs to stand on, I want to use them to their fullest, I want to protect others – that is me!!"

Kai took a couple of swings at the air with his stick. Even with the crude practice weapon in hand, his determined face and the fire he put into each of his strikes… I think made him look real cool.

“You won’t tell mom and dad, will you, Zeriah?”

“Of course not, you can trust me!”

“Thanks. Though honestly, I feel a bit guilty for making you lie.”

“Well… is it really lying if you don’t say anything?”

“Heh, good point, we’ll tell them all eventually. Thanks for understanding, it makes me feel confident to know someone is cheering me on.”

At that moment, I got this nudging feeling in my chest. It called me to step forth, growing more furious by the second, like if I didn’t do something to sooth it, it would pummel me into oblivion.

“Kai… do you think that perhaps… someone like me could… maybe… learn how to fight with a sword as good as you?”

Kai’s face jumped from surprise. He gave me a chuckling grin and thrust his stick to point towards me.

“Are you kidding? Of course you can, we’re brothers, after all!”

From that day forth, Kai and I would practice swordplay together every day. Neither of us knew exactly what we were doing, but together we learned as we went. I got hurt a lot, but I decided to grit my teeth and swallow my tears. I had found something I truly enjoyed. Spending time with Kai like this was our thing, something where we could both support each other as brothers. In a span of a couple of years, I felt myself molding

stronger in mind and body. I started slowly keeping up with Kai, though he'd always stand on top in the end.

Reaching towards the standard set by my older brother, to be as awesome as Kai, would always be something I could strive for. I finally had a direction, something to keep me going. Those days that we spent together are still eternally precious to me.

* * *

I was twelve when my life changed forever.

It was a normal Tuesday morning at the beginning of autumn – breakfast, school trip, boring stuff, back home, an awesome practice session with Kai, then supper – all the things quintessential for another good day were waiting ahead of me, like always. But on that day, something else was waiting for me as well, a toss of dice that would alter my path forever.

We had a tradition – Kai and I – to split our chores by playing dice for them. Like always, we had our competition that morning to see who would be cleaning up after breakfast. Kai ended up winning, leaving me to take care of the dishes while he headed off to school. I remember being a bit salty over the thing, for it was the sixth time in a row that I'd lost, but bet is a bet, nothing to be done there.

After I finally set out towards school myself, I soon came to realize that my bad luck wouldn't stop there. The bridge that crossed the river in the middle of Akrelion had collapsed, quite recently in fact – I later learned that Kai had crossed the bridge no problem. It had something to do with a freak accident involving a bunch of fireworks and a couple of riled-up chickens… yeah, don't ask. At least no one had gotten hurt.

I couldn’t believe my lack of luck; I’d have to take the long way around. The only other bridge to cross the river was outside of town. I ended up running like a maniac, quickly tiring myself out. At this rate I’d be late.

The route for the bridge passed through a grove of apple trees standing right by the riverbank. Once I got about halfway through the path, I was so tired from running that I felt I was gonna puke out my breakfast. With my stomach churning and feet burning, I wobbled to lean against one of the trees, anything to keep me from slumping on my face.

Suddenly, while I was catching my breath, an apple fell on my head from the tree – though naturally, rarely does a head get bonked other than *suddenly*.

I was about to curse my stacked misfortune, when a voice reached out to me from above.

“I’m so sorry! Are you alright?!”

Before I could glimpse up for whomever had just bonked me, the person dropped down right in front of me. With a bunch of leaves sticking out from her sloppily braided hair was a girl, about the same age as me, staring at me with worried expression.

“I didn’t mean to! I was reaching for the apple and it slipped from my hand and–!”

As the girl leaned towards me, I got pressed against the trunk of the tree; she came real close, real fast. She kept peering at the top of my head, as if looking for a wound or something – I mean jeez, it was only *an apple*, not *an anvil*!

I got stumped by the suddenness of it all, simply staring at the eccentric girl with a dumbfounded expression. As our gazes locked, I realized a curious detail in her eyes: her irises were of different colors, the left one clear blue, and the right one deep purple. The sharpness in her eyes felt intense, the colors seemed to pulsate for me, swirling like the waves of an ocean, and glimmering like the climax of a fireworks show.

“Uuh… say something, please…”

I kept gawking at the girl like a fool while lost in my fancy.

The girl pulled away from me abruptly, clasping her cheeks and shivering with terror.

“Oh, no!! I turned you into a simpleton, a drooling idiot!”

“What? Who are you calling an idiot!?”

“Ah, thank goodness, you’re alright! For a moment there I feared I had turned you into a dumb-dumb.”

Again, it was only *an apple*…

The girl snatched the runaway fruit off the ground, biting into her treat ravenously. After a moment of savoring, she began softly humming a cheery melody.

“Mmmh… *So ripe and sweet… talk about absolute bliss…*!”

“Uhm…?”

“Do you like apples?”

“Huh? Oh, yea, they’re alright, I guess.”

The mystery girl gave me a satisfied grin and pointed at the crown of the tree.

“Want one?”

“No thanks, I already ate…”

“I see, that’s alright, there’s more for me then, hihi!”

The whole encounter felt a bit surreal. For one thing, I had never seen the girl at school, or anywhere else for that matter. Was she visiting her relatives or something?

“So… how much longer are we gonna talk about our preferences of fruit before making introductions?”

The girl finished her mouthful of apple in a haste.

“Name’s Miste, nice to meet you!”

I still remember vividly the way that Miste framed her name reveal with a wide smile. Her cheeks flickered with red warmth, bright like the skin of the apple in her hand. I had only ever seen people blushing out of embarrassment or such, but Miste simply beamed the honest joy within her soul through her cheeks in an unbound stream. Her pure glee was mesmerizing; how could a simple meeting with a stranger lift such a raw reaction from someone?

As I kept staring at Miste, her smile quickly morphed into an asking look.

“Are you sure you’re alright, you seem kinda slow?”

“I’m fine, sorry, never mind that. I’m Zeriah Walz, it’s nice to make your acquaintance, Miste.”

“Walz…? Wait, are you related to Gaius and Anglides Walz by any chance?”

“Yeah, how do you know my parents?”

“Know *of* them more accurately. They are the ones who discovered the alaxdrite deposit here, right? The folks at work

mentioned them once. You guys own that fancy villa at the other end of town, right?"

"That's a *yes* on both *rights*. Though what do you mean by *folks at work*?"

"Y'know, as in *the guys I work with at the mines*. I should prolly be grateful, it's thanks to your parents that I have a job, hihihi!"

"Wait, wait, you lost me here… You're saying that a kid like you is working at the alaxdrite mines?"

"Well, you're just a kid yourself…"

"I didn't mean it like that. I mean, don't you have parents who take care of that stuff?"

"Nuh-uh, been taking care of myself for a while now…"

Miste must've sensed my reaction coming from a mile away; she slammed the apple she was holding into my mouth to gag me.

"…And before you even think about the whole *I'm sorry, I didn't realize* -routine, I'll have you know that I'm doing absolutely peachy, really."

I ended up taking a tiny nibble of the apple as Miste yanked the fruit out of my mouth. Her smile told me she was being honest.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a tad flustered over the whole exchange. It was as if every word from Miste, each smile she gave me, every second I spent eyeing at her peculiar features, all came together to stir a cocktail of emotions inside me, intoxicating me, alluring me to forget everything except the special person in front of me. I felt hot, a squeezing pressure took me by the chest. I couldn't avert my eyes, not that I really tried.

“Uhm… so… where exactly do you live?”

Miste looked at me like one would look at a guy who had been recently bonked on the head with an apple.

“You didn’t notice?”

She pointed towards the top of the apple tree. As I turned to gaze at the topmost branches, I found a small house cradled in the midst of the rugged tree’s green leaves. A ladder on the opposite side of the tree led up to the simple residence.

“Haha, guess I really am a bit slow. That’s almost too fitting; where else would an apple-fanatic make her home?”

“Hihihi, I’m glad you approve!”

“Makes heck of a lot of sense, no wonder I haven’t seen you around. I thought I knew all the kids in town from school… Oh, crap!! I’m gonna be totally late!”

I knew I should’ve already been running, but I somehow couldn’t bring myself to move. The same old routines, and nothing more, awaited me at school. All I wanted was to stay and chat with Miste just a bit longer, for everything about her was the opposite of routine.

Miste skipped past me while tapping my shoulder encouragingly.

“Wait here, I won’t be long.”

She climbed up the ladder to her house and slipped inside. A heavy clatter of something getting dragged resounded from the treetop, quickly followed by Miste’s voice.

“Heads up below!!”

A bicycle fell from the tree and crashed right next to me.

“What the hell!? That was really dangerous!!”

“Well, I did say *heads up*…”

“Do you have a habit of throwing junk over people’s heads or something!?”

Miste dropped down in the wake of her bike.

“I don’t normally get too many people loitering under my home.”

“…And how did you even get that thing up there in the first place!?”

“Never you mind that. Here!”

She offered me the bike. Miraculously, it seemed to be fine even after the fall.

“Are you sure?”

“Well, this would be a rather confusing joke, no? Yeah, I’m sure!”

“I don’t know what to say–”

“Probably best to think about that later, you’re in a hurry, right?”

“Right, thanks! I promise I’ll return it right after school.”

“I certainly hope so. I said I’m doing peachy by myself, but not peachy enough to be handing out free bikes.”

The snarky yet warm grin on Miste’s lips had me chuckling in return. I once again got lost simply staring at her beaming expression.

“Uh, Zeriah? School?”

“Ah, right… I’ll be on my way then… Uhm… Will you be here after…”

“I have the day off, so I’ll be right here.”

“Alright, see you then.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I kicked off with refueled vigor, with Miste waving me a cheerful goodbye.

* * *

For the entire day, I couldn’t get my mind off the eccentric girl living up an apple tree. Whatever I tried to do, her smiling face would constantly appear to distract me. My feet itched for the school day to be over, so that I could rush back to return her bike and thank her properly.

You know those times when a day suddenly feels bizarrely long? Well, this one certainly felt like an eternity!

By the end of the day, the main bridge across the river was back in use with temporary fixes, though my own path home would go by the same detour as before. For the first time since I-don’t-know-when, Kai and I went our separate ways after school.

“Sorry, bro, I think I’ll skip training for today, I have to return the bike. Tell mom and dad I’ll be home by supper.”

“This *Miste* sounds like quite the special girl.”

“She’s… rather unique.”

“Is she cute?”

“Wh–What? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, nothing… But is she cute though?”

“I… yea, sure… if you like that sort of thing…”

“Hehe, I see… *that* cute, huh? I kinda want to meet her too.”

“You can come along if you want, I bet she’d like you.”

Kai shook his head with a sigh, like he was deeply disappointed in me. He gave me a sharp flick on the forehead.

“And cramp your style? No way! You’re already doing so well.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

Kai brought me closer, ruffling my hair harder than ever before.

“Come on, Zeriah, don’t be so dense.”

He left me to my own devices, throwing me a somewhat cheeky farewell.

“Good luck – go out there and make your brother proud!”

“Why do I suddenly feel like a rooster getting shoved inside a chicken coop…”

* * *

On my way biking along the riverside and towards the great apple tree that Miste called her home, I heard alarmed yelps carrying from afar ahead. When I reached the scene, I found Miste at the root of her home, fighting with a large mist crow. Well, it was less actual *fighting*, and more like Miste shooing the bird away with a stick, and the creature responding by screeching and fluttering about.

“Go on!! Get out of here, you!!”

A well-placed smack from Miste’s stick finally convinced the crow to scatter. The bird limped through the air while shrieking

pitifully in defeat, quickly disappearing beyond the hills on the other side of the river.

“And don’t come back!!”

“What, did that crow try to snatch your stash of apples or something?”

“Oh, hi Zeri! Nah, I wouldn’t mind sharing my treats, were it just that.”

“*Zeri*…?”

Were we already at the point to give each other nicknames?

Miste climbed the tree while eyeing intently for something amidst the branches above.

“There!”

She pointed at a large branch that extended to grow above the river. At the very tip of the branch, there was a slumped-down bird, with red feathers and a sharp plume sticking from its head. I recognized the bird as a *flare-winged swallowpecker*, a rather rare breed up in the north. I guess school was good for something at least.

“The crow was bullying this poor little thing, and I had to help it.”

Miste shimmied towards the red bird. The little thing looked like its wing was injured. It began twitching in place once it saw Miste approaching, not too excited about being disturbed further.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna hurt you.”

The bird nudged further towards the tip of the branch. As Miste followed the cowering bird, the branch began to droop under her weight.

“Be careful, Miste, that looks quite dangerous!”

“I’m okay, I’ll just–”

Just then, the branch snapped in half, and the girl and the bird went crashing down into the river below.

“Miste!!!”

For a good while, the stream swallowed the fallen duo like the maw of a ravenous beast. There was no sign of the girl nor the bird. A cold bar of iron rammed through my chest, stopping my heart still. It was a feeling that would become quite common for me…

A splash, followed by a gurgled gasp for air surfaced a few paces downstream. Miste was clasping on a large rock by the riverbank, with the rapid stream pulling her away fast. I managed to grab her hand just as her grip slipped from the smooth and wet rock. Fighting against the river was tough; by the time I yanked Miste safely to the shore I was completely drained.

As expected after a dip like that, Miste was soaking wet, and the chilly autumn breeze didn’t help a thing, she was shivering like crazy, though she seemed more concerned about the tiny bird she was clasping in her hand.

Luckily, both the girl and the bird ended up just fine.

After a quick change of clothes, Miste invited me up to her treehouse nest.

The apartment was cramped; between an overly stuffed bookcase, a heater unit occupying the corner next to it, a work desk, and a hammock strung up beside it, there was just barely enough room to turn.

Miste wrapped the tiny red bird inside a roll of hefty bandaging. The creature seemed to have calmed down after its near-fatal dip in cold water, and was now more trusting to leave itself in Miste's care. After enjoying a handful of seeds, the little thing fell asleep on Miste's work desk. Funnily enough, the care shown by Miste would make the swallowpecker rather fond of human company. It later took liking to Miste's elder coworker, Sasha, living as the woman's trusted partner even to this day.

Miste seated me on the chair next to the work desk while she brewed a pot of tea for the two of us. I never really liked tea – and I still don't – but I figured that it would be rude of me to decline.

"Whew, what a day! I can't remember the last time with this much excitement. How 'bout you, Zeri?"

"I for one am perfectly fine without my heart freezing from dread, thanks."

"Sorry for giving you such a scare, and thanks for saving me, Zeri."

"It's alright, I'm just glad you're okay. Though what's with all the *Zeri* -stuff?"

"You don't like it? I just thought that the name *Zeri* sounded kinda cute, something fun to call you by."

"It's not that, it's just… a bit soon for nicknames, don't you think?"

“I don’t follow…?”

“I mean, we barely know each other.”

“Hmm… but we’re friends, right? Does it matter how long we’ve known?”

Miste placed the cup of tea in my hand while giving me a firm smile, her cheeks flashing gleefully red.

Somehow, meeting Miste’s confident eyes had me feeling awkward. Everything about the day felt sort of unreal, like it wasn’t *me* who was supposed to be sitting there, with the awesomely energetic girl serving me tea and offering words of friendship. I felt unworthy.

“It’s nice of you to think me as a friend.”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I?”

“I guess I… I haven’t done anything to deserve it.”

“Well, you aren’t supposed to *deserve* friends, I think. You simply become friends, right?”

Miste dropped to sit on her hammock, sipping her tea.

“Besides, you fished me out of the river earlier, that should count as something.”

“Yeah, sorry, never mind what I said. Of course we’re friends.”

“Hihihi, I’m glad we got that sorted out!”

We ended up talking for a good while. The more I learned about Miste and her past, about all the hardships that she’d managed to leave behind, and how she’d made a comfortable life for herself using her untiring resolve, the more I honestly felt inadequate by comparison.

Although she didn't go to school, she was extremely studious, her bookcase brimming with tomes handling a variety of fields. Not only that, but she turned out to be a fanatic about all things alax-tech; her desk was covered by a pile of schematics for different gizmos of her own design. *Concepts in progress*, she said, but from a twelve-year-old girl, and a mostly self-thought tech-nut, it was still impressive.

As I scanned through the rows of books that decorated the apartment wall with their mighty spines, my eyes fixated on the only work I recognized.

"Oh, you have a copy of *Tale as Old as Alchemy* – I remember reading it when I was little."

Miste's eyes gleamed like those of a cat getting a whiff of freshly caught fish.

"It's my favorite book ever! The heroine is so cool, and the cast is so much fun, and I liked the twist towards the end, about the… well, y'know. It's prolly like one of the best stories ever written, don't you think?!"

"Yeah, I liked it too, it's a heartwarming story."

"Right! I'm glad you feel that way too. Most people think that the ending ruins it with how sad it is."

"I always thought it was rather inspiring."

"Me too! We have so much in common!"

"I suppose we do."

Miste picked the book off the shelf, sliding her hand over the bumpy letters of gold on the cover. Her warm smile mixed with a hint of somberness as she held the worn-out storybook.

“Sorry for gushing, I simply love it so much. To me, it’s more than just a story, I’m the person that I am today partly because of it. My dream stems from the times when this book was the only friend I had.”

“Your dream?”

“I want to apply to Hex Nova to become an Adventurer, then I’ll travel the world and learn all about its secrets, just like Cleo from the book.”

A grand yet simplistic goal like that would usually be retorted by an amused shrug, yet the way that Miste’s soul blazed with pure determination made it impossible but to nod in approval.

“I bet you’ll do great.”

“Thanks, Zeri. The more people I have cheering for me, the more reasons I have to push myself to the limit. Cos if people believe in my dream, then it’s our united dream! I refuse to let my friends down, so backing away isn’t an option anymore!”

“Sounds like a lot of pressure to me.”

Miste shook her head.

“We can’t change the past, but the days ahead are open to all kinds of possibilities, and as long as we have those days to look forward to, nothing is out of grasp, so there’s no worry, just push forward, right?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“That’s what Sasha always tells me.”

“Good thing you have people around to support you.”

I wondered; would mom ever say anything like that to Kai over his dream of becoming a knight?

Miste poured herself another cup of tea. There was probably still some chilliness from the river left on her bones.

“So, what about you, Zeri? What do you do for fun, aside from fishing girls out of the water?”

“Nothing much, can’t say there’s anything that special about me.”

“Somehow I don’t believe that. Come on, you can tell me!”

“…You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“Hmm? Ooh, a secret! Now I just gotta know! Don’t fret, you can totally trust me.”

“Well… Nearly every day, my brother and I go to the woods on the far edge of town to practice swordplay. My brother actually wants to join the Knights of Minerva when he grows up. He’s really good.”

The brilliant colors in Miste’s eyes flashed from excitement.

“That’s awesome! I knew there was something special about you, I just knew it!”

“You can’t tell anyone! We haven’t shared this with anyone yet. Mom can get pretty strict sometimes and… she wouldn’t understand…”

“I see. I swear, your secret is safe with me.”

“Thanks, Miste.”

“It’s quite spectacular though… I kinda want to see you two going at it.”

“You could come along sometime and watch.”

“Really!? Alright, I will! Hihi, I totally can’t wait!”

It was starting to get late; mom and dad would be worried if I didn't return home soon. As I was about to climb down from the treehouse, Miste took me by the hand all of a sudden.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

"Nope, everything is peachy. I just wanted to ask something before you go."

"Alright…?"

"I bet this sounds kinda stupid, with you going to school and everything, but… I'm really happy that we met. You see, I've never had a friend my own age before and… I had fun today, so… thank you, Zeri."

"I'm glad we met too… I think you're really awesome, Miste."

"Honest?!"

"Yeah. So, what did you want to ask me?"

"Oh, right! I was just thinking, to celebrate our new friendship, if I could give you a hug?"

"A hug?"

Miste's cheeks flared with red, and this time clearly from embarrassment.

"I–I'm not saying you have to if you don't want to…"

"Sure, why not."

Miste smiled softly. The red on her cheeks and the way she rubbed her fingers together all bashful made her look absolutely adorable.

"Alright, here I come. Don't worry, I promise to be gentle."

"Good, I was worried there for a second."

Miste nudged close and slipped her arms around me. She pressed against me tightly, making our heartbeats mingle through our chests. Her cheek felt cottony against my shoulder. Waves of caressing warmth washed through my body, dancing in sync with her breathing.

I caught Miste by her back and around her shoulders, pulling her a tad closer. She twitched ever so slightly from my touch. The scent of fresh apples wafted from her hair, soothing and sweet. My heart bubbled with glee from all the sensations, I didn't want to let go.

I can't tell how long we held our embrace; it was a moment that felt like it was over in a second, and yet like I had traveled on a grand journey far away and back.

As we unbound our lock, I felt a tiny void forming within my heart – or maybe it had always been there, I just hadn't realized it until then. I felt addicted, I wanted to hold Miste close to me again. Her warmth was the purest sensation of something feeling *right*. Back then I couldn't be certain, but the glimmer in Miste's eyes told that she felt the same. She took a pronounced step backwards, twirling a strand of loose hair around her finger, with a coy smile on her lips.

"I hope we'll see each other again real soon."

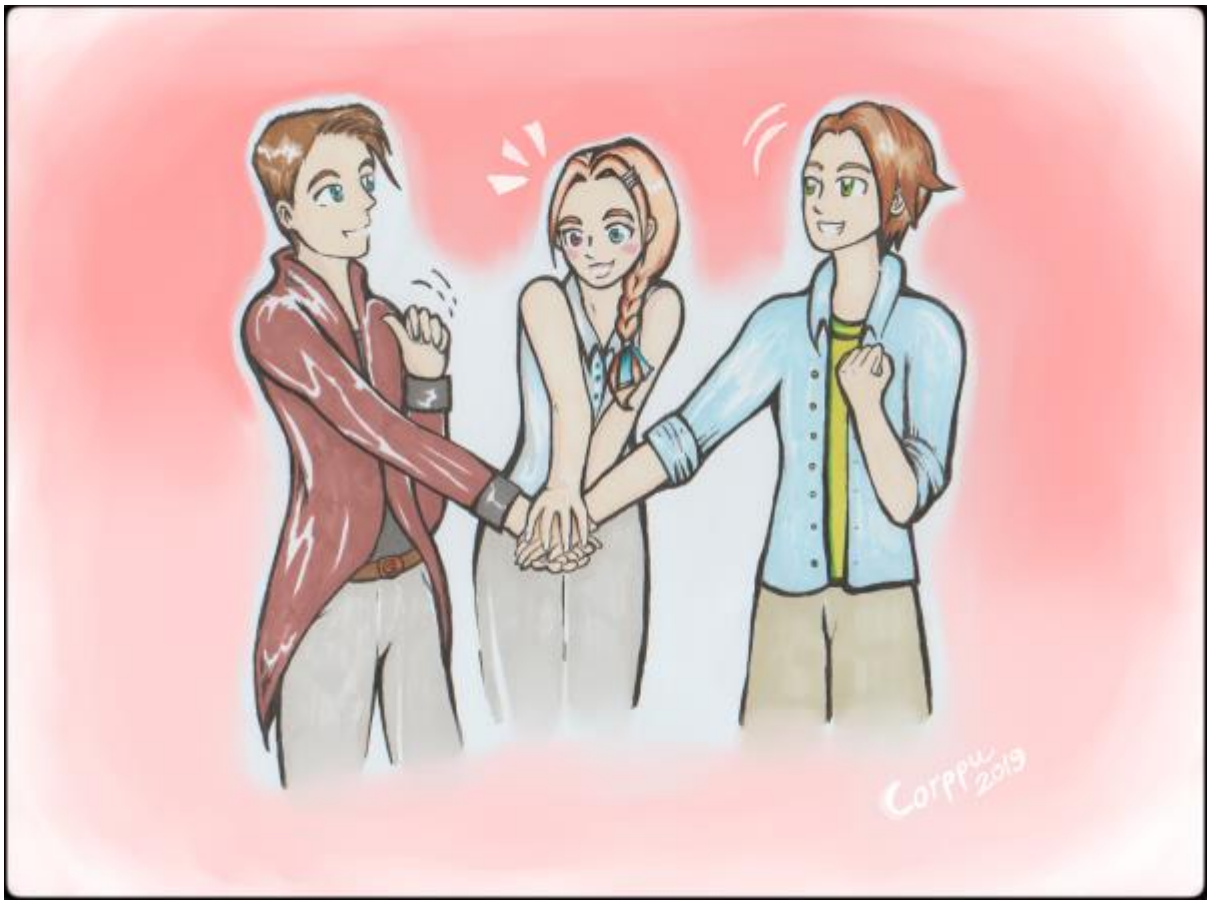
"Yeah, me too…"

* * *

The next couple of years flew by almost unnoticed. After I had introduced Miste to Kai, our training in swordsmanship, as well as Kai's secret dream, would be things to bind us three together inseparably. The small glade in the middle of the woods became

our secret hideout, almost like a second home for the three of us.

Miste would come watch us train whenever her work shifts at the mines would allow her. Having someone who believed in us made both Kai and I push ourselves unlike ever before. Miste's presence, her cheering, her comforting smile, they were the most potent fuel to us both. She even carved a pair of proper training swords for the two of us. I think there was actually a tear in Kai's eye when he saw them.



Miste and Kai got along really well right away, fitting, for Kai had always been popular with the girls. I remember holding all kinds of stupid ideas in my head, about how Kai would be a better fit for Miste and such. Of course, it was all for naught. Kai didn't see Miste like that, nor did Miste ever look at Kai in quite the same way as she looked at me. I can't say when exactly my

own fancy for Miste turned into love, but what I can say is that I should have come forth with my feelings way sooner than I eventually did. In retrospect, the way I was so afraid to show my true self in front of the person I loved seems absolutely stupid. I remember Kai constantly teasing me about my indecisiveness.

The time for unabashed honesty would come when I turned fourteen, prompted by a cruel quirk of chance.

I can't remember exactly what I was looking for, but somehow, I'd ended up rummaging through the drawers in mom and dad's study room. Among some old documents, my gaze stumbled upon my own name appearing repeatedly. It took me a great while to process the information fully, due to the fact that the revelation was something I didn't want to believe as true. I prayed that I had misinterpreted something.

In the end, the absolute truth remained; I wasn't mom and dad's biological son. I'd been adopted.

Once the gravity of the revelation finally sank in, I was near to throw up from horror. I wasn't a Walz, not really. Kai and I weren't brothers. I was an outsider. I would never measure up to my not-really-brother. Now more than ever, I felt truly unworthy, like a piece of trash. It was sickening to think that I was breathing the same air as Kai, weighting him down, he had no real obligation to me, I was nothing to him. My existence in itself was a fabrication.

I spent the entire day in a daze, my soul half-removed from my body.

I was scared, I didn't know whether or not I should say something. How would Kai react? I couldn't bear the thought of

losing him, yet the idea of keeping the truth hidden from him felt absolutely sickening.

The day rolled by along its course; I was sure that neither Kai nor Miste suspected a thing. I wouldn't let my sorrow show.

During sword practice, the fact that I was forced to stare Kai right in the eye, all the while holding my tongue to keep up the façade of there ever being anything binding between us made me feel… well, let's just say I wasn't doing my best.

One of Kai's strikes stubbed me over my knuckles, the pain had me cursing with a shriek, the volume reflecting my built-up frustration.

Miste rushed to check on me.

"Are you alright, Zeri?"

"It's fine, don't bother!!"

I snapped at Miste and drove her away, I couldn't handle her kindness right then.

As I kept coiling in pain, Kai caught me by the shoulder with a steely grip and a comforting grin.

"Let's call it a day, we already got some good practice in."

I yanked myself free defiantly.

My thoughts were a mess. The constant pulling of fear on one side, and the disgust over lying on the other – it felt like if I kept my anguish within me any longer I would be ripped apart.

"Kai, what if I told you I'm not the person you think I am… what would you do?"

"Kinda dumb question, I know who you are, so I can't really tell what I would do. *What ifs* don't interest me all that much."

I ended up pretty much just blurting it out.

“Mom and dad are not my real parents. I found the adoption papers from their study.”

I remember the look on Miste’s face once I finally came clean about what I knew, I remember it so well because I was staring at her instead of Kai. I couldn’t bear to look at Kai as I denounced our blood relation. Strangely, there was not much shock on Miste’s face, as there was sorrow, manifesting in an almost tearful smile trying its best to aim comfort at me.

Kai’s retort lashed at me like the blunt end of a sword.

“So, that’s why you’ve been so antsy today?”

“Wait… did you know!?”

“I was quite small when you arrived, but I kinda managed to put two and two together, seeing as mom didn’t get all fat before having you, it didn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

Kai’s initially tetchy tone morphed into a softer one.

“Zeriah, it doesn’t matter–”

“It so *does* matter!!”

A storm of anger brewed inside my heart, instantly taking me over. I couldn’t help my own weakness, the whiplash that my soul had gone through that day pushed me over the edge.

“What the hell am I to you?! A joke?! You three have kept me in the dark about this my entire fucking life!! Hope it was fun watching me being clueless to everything!! You’re all liars!!”

I screamed through a fountain of tears; all that I had ever believed in was crumbling away.

“You have no idea what matters to me! I’ve never cherished anything as much as the fact that I could call you my brother! It meant that I too must be good for something, after all, we’re made of the same blood! But now, all of that is gone, I’m nothing, I’ll never be able to reach your level! I’m not your brother, Kai… you were the last person I would think for a liar–”

Suddenly, I felt the most intense pain I’d ever suffered, a single strike across my cheek, like an explosion compressed into the shape of a fist. Kai’s punch sent me on my back.

His expression was terrifying: a twisted face, eyes watery, yet flaring like a midsummer pyre, teeth clenched tight, like a last desperate support before a collapsing damn.

“Have mom and dad ever treated you differently from me?! Have I ever shown you anything but love?! You know nothing, you damned prick! I *am* your brother, Zeriah, whether you truly appreciate it or not! And if I ever hear you say anything as stupid as that again, I swear I’ll beat you to death’s door!”

Kai turned to leave. As he passed Miste, he gave her a solemn look, like a silent apology. After that, he dashed off, leaving me to lick my wounds while Miste watched on from the side.

It took a moment from Miste – simply staring at me being mopey, and pathetic, and unresponsive – before she spoke out, or rather yelled.

“What is the matter with you, Zeri!? Go after him!”

As I gave no answer, Miste grabbed my arm and began yanking me to move.

“Come on! This is all stupid! You can still catch Kai, you two have to make up!”

“It doesn’t matter anymore…”

“You don’t mean that, come on!”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? I’m not the person I thought I was.”

“Well, you’re still the same person I know you to be – now move your butt!”

I snatched myself free from Miste’s grip with excessive force, her yelp told me I must’ve hurt her.

“You can’t understand how I feel, so leave me alone!”

“I can’t understand, huh… just like Kai was simply deceiving you this entire time? We both care about you, and want to help you, yet you try to push us away. What do you want, Zeri, honestly?”

“I wanted to be like Kai… strong, admirable, someone who could be depended upon.”

“You can still be–”

“I have never been anything special! I’m an absolute zero! My only speck of hope was that maybe I could one day be even half the man my brother is. But now, I realize that I’m really nothing but an unwanted piece of filth, something thrown aside, living off other people’s charity.”

“You absolute damned moron!!!”

It was the first time I’d seen Miste truly upset. The color in her eyes seemed to melt, running down her cheeks as she sobbed, with each gurgle getting louder and more pitiful.

“Why do you have to say those horrible things about yourself?! Why do you push us away?! I know full well what it feels like to

be unwanted, to have everyone looking down on you, to have no one to play with, it's horrible, it hurts, it saps your spirit, it makes you hate everything and everyone, I know it because I've lived through it, and I never want to go back there again! Please, Zeri… I don't want to see you suffer."

Miste crumbled down on her knees, weeping inside her palms.

"Why can't you understand that there are people who love you just for being you… You're the kind of person who doesn't get mad when someone makes silly mistakes, the kind of person who can be trusted to lend a bike to, the kind of person who leaps into action to save someone they just met from drowning… I think you're awesome, Zeri… so why…?"

I had never before nor since felt as much like a piece of shit. It was only then that I realized how badly I'd misspoken. Miste was someone who had fought past her own anxieties about her past, and was now a stronger and happier person, the kind of girl who was hard not to fall for. On the other end, I was someone who had always received everything simply handed to me, even with my sorry origins, whatever those might've been. I was the last person in the right to feel sorry for myself next to Miste.

"Miste… I'm sorry…"

She sprang up, sucking in her tears, and shook her head furiously.

"Don't mind me! Go after Kai."

"But I–"

"I said go! Go and make up – I'll never forgive you if you don't, hear me?"

“I… I hear ya…”

As I looked at Miste’s teary face, an iron grip took ahold of my heart, strangling it dry. Seeing her like that was horrifying, and it was all my fault. I realized that the only thing I could do was to finally take a step forward, and own up to my responsibility – not just for my happiness, but for Miste as well. It was high time for honesty.

“Will I see you tomorrow after school, at your place?”

“We shall wait and see… it depends whether or not you’ll patch things up with Kai.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

I tried reaching for Miste’s hand, but she sidestepped me completely while averting her gaze in a pouty way.

“Sorry… I guess I deserve a bit of cold shoulder. Tomorrow then. Wait for me, Miste. I have something very important I want to talk to you about.”

“Well, that’s just dandy…”

There was a teensiest flicker of red on Miste’s cheeks, decorating a subdued smile.

* * *

I took my time walking home, hoping that by some miracle I’d find the perfect words to say to mend things between me and Kai. Naturally, with my heart and mind still in disarray, I was at a complete loss.

From the outside, our house seemed to have morphed from what I remembered it. Each of the steps leading up to the porch were a tad higher, the railing made of hand-carved cherry felt

bulky against my palm, and the front door was like a massive gate looming before me, seething with cold. An ominous feeling of brewing storm was hanging over our home, even with the clear and cloudless sky above it.

As I entered, I quickly realized that the actual storm had in fact already passed by, leaving behind, if not true destruction, then at the least a set of mangled hearts.

The first thing that hit me was the sorrowful tooting of a trumpet from upstairs – from Kai's room. The melody eluded to feelings of fatigue over adversities, crackling and droning, yet with a trace of hope, grasping for specks of joy still lingering, even if slowly fading. It was rare for Kai to bust out his other instrument – besides the sword, I mean. There must've been a lot on his mind.

I found dad sitting alone in the living room, reading a book in perfect calm. Although his face betrayed no true emotion, I still felt that something was off. He noticed my arrival only when the front door creaked shut behind me.

"Ah, Zeriah, you're back."

I knew immediately from dad's voice that he knew that I knew about my origins. Kai must have told him. I had never seen anyone getting up from their chair with such prominence as dad did.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine… really, I think I am."

"Is that so…?"

Dad walked up to me, giving me a stern smile, or something of the like.

“It’s alright to feel upset, Zeriah. What you found out must have been–”

“No, please, dad… I’m fine… I feel stupid for… for thinking even for a moment that you and mom didn’t…”

Before I could fully burst out weeping, dad caught me inside his firm embrace.

“You’d still call us parents?! We’ve raised such a sweet boy.”

“You have, you really have, *you* and no one else! Thank you… for loving me…”

Dad placed me in front of him, his smile luminous.

“Of course we love our own son! In fact, you make it quite easy, with the beyond mature way you are taking this. I feel embarrassed for keeping this from you all this time, I should have trusted you to handle the truth.”

I wiped my face dry with a single swipe.

“Well, I got some sense beaten into me… How’s Kai? I said some stupid things to him earlier and managed to make him real upset, I hope he doesn’t hate me.”

“Your brother is strong, and he cares for you just as much as your mother and I do. He’ll come around.”

“…Where is mom?”

Dad’s expression took a nudge towards troubled; he did his best to hide it with a widening smile.

“Anglides went out for some fresh air. You know how your mother is, Zeriah. She went a bit… hysterical, after hearing what happened from your brother. Kai… he didn’t exactly try to help

matters… I think he was more saddened than anything, but… well… they got into a fight."

"All this because of me…"

"It's not quite that. Turns out that Kai had a lot on his chest, and not just concerning you."

"You mean… he told you?"

"Yes, he told how you two have been practicing with swords, and about his plans to apply for the Knights of Minerva."

"I bet mom wasn't happy."

"She wasn't exactly thrilled about it."

"And you?"

Dad sighed wearily.

"It is my belief that I am a man most fortunate in life. I cannot think of treasures that would still be amiss from my life. The greatest of these treasures are my two wonderful sons. As long as you put your minds into chasing your goals, I have no doubt that fortune will smile on the both of you. It is not my place to hinder you, whatever the path you end up deciding. I wish for you to be happy – only then I can be happy for you."

"Dad…"

"And no matter what your mother may say or do, deep within she wishes the exact same, I'm sure of it. She'll come around to accept Kai's choice, eventually. What about you? Are you thinking of following in your brother's footsteps?"

I had to take a moment to mull my answer…

"Have you ever had the feeling that you want something more than anything, like you have a dream that is grander than the

world, yet at the same time, you know that something just as wonderful is waiting for you right beside you, someone who is everything you could ever want, who cares only for you, someone who feels like the entire world squeezed down to a single person, and even though her own dreams defy the limits of possible, she always has time for you and your sorrows, making you think what you should be striving for?"

…In the end, I ended up with a jumbled mess.

Dad chuckled shortly, giving me a sly eyeballing.

"Oh, I have felt that – believe me, I have. I hope you'll be telling this person how you feel soon."

"I intend to, I just hope my words will come out genuine."

"From the way you speak about her, I think they already have."

Dad grabbed me by the shoulder and shook me firmly.

"I think your own dream is shaping out quite nicely, Zeriah."

"Yea, I'm starting to think so too. I should probably talk with Kai for a bit."

"Sure."

After giving me a supportive pat on the back, dad retired back to his chair. He let out a cleansing sigh as he grabbed his book.

"I'm going to miss your brother's playing once he's gone…"

"Me too, dad… me too…"

I noticed how the free-flowing melody of Kai's trumpet shifted in passion as I got closer to his room; whether to drive me away or to welcome me to enter, I couldn't exactly tell.

As I eventually gathered enough courage to step through the door that had been left just a tad open, I found Kai lounging at the far end of the room, over the windowsill, his gaze locked past his instrument and towards the far horizon.

I waited patiently by the door, listening, with a strange sense of longing pulsing within my chest, while Kai kept on playing for a moment longer, finally bringing his improvised melody into a smoothly fading outro. After the last note vanished into the realm of memory, Kai placed his trumpet to sit on the windowsill, leaving the room in a state of foreboding silence.

He wouldn't look at me; only the horizon seemed to interest him. I couldn't blame him. Even after all the years we had spent as a family, I had been ready to throw our bond away simply due to my own insecurities. If Kai should hate me, I wouldn't argue, only beg that he would someday be able to forgive me.

I had to really push myself to muster the nerve to reach out to him.

"Kai… I'm so–"

He cut me short immediately, raising his voice into an imposing tone.

"One of the most vivid memories I have from when I was but a toddler – like four or so – is the time mom first brought you inside this house."

Kai held a brief break, sighing out with the taste of tears wetting his breath. His voice softened as he continued, each of his words radiating warmth like a fireplace filled with crackling embers.

"You had been left by our doorstep, no knock, no note, no nothing, just you. You were crying nonstop, no matter how

much mom cuddled you up, you just wouldn't calm down. It's like you knew… that you'd been left alone… all alone…"

Kai winced in anguish, like a fierce blizzard had suddenly surrounded him.

"I remember rushing downstairs to see what the hubbub was about, and I fell on my face on the very last step. Mom came to comfort me, while still carrying you. I reached for her hand, and…"

Kai turned towards me, though he still wouldn't look at me. He showed his hands clasping together tightly.

"…Somehow, you managed to grab hold of my finger, and as soon as you did… you stopped crying. You were so small, I'd never seen hands that tiny, and yet, you squeezed me so tightly. Eventually, you fell asleep while grasping my hand."

Kai kept his gaze strictly averted from me, his face revealing his welling emotions clearly.

"At that moment, I guess I… sort of… fell in love."

A tear rolled along his cheek, all the way to the tip of his chin, and dropped to the floor.

"I still can't understand how someone could just leave you… it pisses me off simply thinking about it… but at the same time… I'm glad they did… cos now I have the best… the best brother… I could ever ask for…"

"Kai…"

Kai's lips quivered as he wiped his cheek.

"Damn it, Zeriah! You can really be a shithead when you feel like it, y'know!"

“I’m sorry. What I said was all so stupid…”

I couldn’t hold back my own tears.

“Can you ever… *sniffle* forgive me… bro?”

Kai waved for me to come closer. He pressed my head against his chest and ruffled my hair softly. I could feel his smile through the intense beating of his heart.

“I can’t stay mad at my own brother. Hehe… you are as loud of a bawler as ever.”

“Haha… yeah… I guess I am.”

“I’m sorry I hit you.”

“It’s alright… I deserved it.”

Kai held his firm hold over me for a good while, until the last of my tears had run dry. As my big brother released his grip, I sat down next to him on the windowsill.

“I heard you had a fight with mom.”

“It had to happen at some point. I’ll be on my way soon anyway.”

As if trying to brush the line of conversing aside, Kai’s gaze drifted out the window and towards the farthest hills covered in pure-white roses that surrounded our home. I followed his example, and we spent a moment in perfect silence, simply admiring as the sea of white flora danced along the whims of the wind.

“The years have gone by so fast. Just yesterday we were a pair of kids whacking each other numb with sticks. And soon, you’ll be going out to fulfill your dream. You’ll make an awesome knight, I just know it, nothing less from my big bro!”

Kai gave no real response, aside from the slightest twitch in the corner of his lip. Suddenly, he turned for me with a riddle.

“What is the farthest thing that you can see?”

“Huh? The farthest thing…? Well… The roses? The hills?”

“No, beyond that, what is the absolute farthest thing that your eyes can reach?”

I had to ponder Kai’s riddle for a while. Finally, I erupted smiling as I came up with the answer.

“The horizon!”

Kai gave me a grinning nod in approval.

“Heh, nothing less from my little bro! And do you know what’s the quirkiest thing about the horizon?”

“What?”

“No matter how far you go, you can never reach it. No one can stand on the edge of horizon, with nothing else to look forward to. As much as you praise me, or look up to me, never forget that you hold endless potential too.”

Kai gave me an intense look of encouragement.

“You may not believe it yet, but one day, you will be everything that you see in me. You’re stronger than you think, Zeriah.”

“Bro…”

Kai rubbed his neck, slightly embarrassed.

“If I’m being perfectly honest, having a kid brother with such high expectations makes me feel like I have to give it my all and beyond. After all, I want to live up to that awesome image you’ve built of me.”

His gaze gathered steel, a lifetime's worth of enthusiasm and confidence manifested into a fiery grin.

"I won't simply become a knight, I'll become the best, most awesome knight that the Order has ever seen! Just watch me, Zeriah."

"Yeah! You go bro!"

A soft smirk settled on Kai's face as he turned to gaze at the horizon once more.

"Uhm, Kai?"

"What is it, little bro?"

"Could you… play a bit more?"

"Heh, sure!"

Kai's trumpet filled the room with melodies of gleeful determination – though carrying a hint of a goodbye looming close.



* * *

I visited Miste the next day, like I'd promised. She was sitting on a large branch right outside her treehouse-nest, dangling her feet in the air while reading a book. Her look of content calm gathered a sense of subdued dread as she noticed my arrival – she must've still been upset about yesterday. Despite of that, she called me to join her up the apple tree.

"Hi Miste! What are you reading?"

The book on Miste's lap was on the subject of metallurgy and smithing. She put the tome aside defiantly. The objects of her academic interest were clearly not the hot topic of the day.

"Just something for future reference, never mind that. So, how's everything on your end?"

"We made up – Kai and I are still brothers!"

I tried to garnish my statement with as much enthusiasm as I could. Miste's reply was clearly joyous, yet lukewarm at the same time.

"Good, I'm glad."

I seated myself next to Miste, mimicking her way of dangling her feet in the air. As I nudged closer to her, she adjusted herself further away in response, sending me a clear sign of the murky air between us. I was expecting nothing less, truly, I had managed to be quite the dumb-dumb earlier. That's exactly why I had come; to patch things up and strengthen our bond.

"Miste, about yesterday–"

"If you and Kai have already made up, then I have nothing more to discuss about that."

"I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry, I didn't stop to think about… well, anything. I never even considered how my words might sound like to you."

"I said it's fine, really."

Miste hid her hands between her legs while fidgeting nervously – either she had to go to the toilet real bad, or something was not quite fine.

"Do you hate your parents, Miste? For abandoning you, I mean?"

She was quiet for a prolonged while.

"I think… I used to hate pretty much the entire world… I felt so alone… worthless…"

Miste shook her head to clear her thoughts.

“I was so stupid back then, acting like my pain was somehow grander than everyone else’s… it’s weird in a way… the moment that I decided to stop feeling sorry for myself and take a step towards making my future a brighter one, I came to realize that the world is filled with wonderful people who really do care and want me around. Now, I have a family, all the guys at the mines, and a dream I can strive for.”

Miste gave me a quizzical look, the gleam in her eyes betraying her honest worry over me.

“How about you?”

“I… don’t really think I have the energy to hold a grudge for someone I’ve never even met. What good would it even do?”

Miste’s response was an agreeing nod.

I gave her the most boastful smirk I could muster, leaning back with overflowing poise.

“Tch, and besides, I think my life as it stands right now is pretty great, awesome even. A shame I didn’t truly appreciate it all until recently.”

I made our gazes meet, locking firmly in place. The sharp colors of blue, purple, and lime-green all melded together as our reflections bounced endlessly across our eyes. I let my soul pour out unlike ever before, beaming through my entire being. I was ready to be honest, and to chase after what I desired.

“Miste.”

“Y–Yes?!”

The weight in her name being uttered painted a splash of red across Miste’s cheeks.

“I’m grateful for my life ending up the way it did, because I got to meet you.”

“!!”

The red spread out slowly to cover Miste’s entire face.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what I want to do with my life. You and Kai both have such grand plans for your future – I can’t help but feel inspired to try my hardest too, to see my full potential unfold. I wanted to ask you, Miste, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to come with you and apply to become Adventurers together.”

“!!!”

The blazing red on Miste’s face was reaching critical mass.

“I want to see you safe on your travels, I want to become your shield, so that you can enjoy your journey to the fullest. That is the cause I want to place my sword upon. I’ll become the strongest swordsman that the world has ever known, that is the dream I want to chase, with you.”

I reached for Miste’s hand. As my fingers brushed against hers, the fluster that had usurped Miste’s face exploded out via an unrestrained yelp.

“!!!!!!”

Miste jumped to stand on the branch, nearly falling over. After regaining her balance, she sat back down and turned her back towards me. She brought her fingers to rub together shyly. Her voice came out frail, like a mouse twitching its nose out of its nest to check for safe surroundings.

“Zeri… what you’re saying is…”

“I wasn’t done yet.”

“Th–There’s more!!?”

I tapped her shoulder, persuading her to awkwardly spin back around to face me.

I was on the verge of revealing the most precious feeling within my soul out loud for the first time. I had to take a massive breath to calm myself.

“I think I’ve already dodged it long enough, so I’m just going to say it. Miste… I…”

Miste’s cheeks had probably burned out from blushing, for her face remained calm, a smile forming on her lips in anticipation.

“Zeri…”

“…I love you.”

Miste’s smile erupted into a giggling laughter. A single gleeful tear rolled past her cheek. She lunged to embrace me, nuzzling her cheek against mine. I felt her heart hammering against my chest like crazy.

“Hihihi! What took you so long?! I’ve felt the same about you since forever!”

We spent a moment simply enjoying our shared warmth while our hearts mingled their true feelings for one another.

“So… about my request–”

“Of course! Let’s become Adventurers together!”

Miste took my cheeks inside her palms and brought her lips close to mine.

“I’m so happy…”

She stopped just shy from letting our lips touch, her crafty grin and soft breath alluring me to close the gap. I took the bait with delight.

Our first kiss lasted only for a brief moment, but even that, were the world to end right then and there, would've made my existence in this world to have meaning.

* * *

Since turning a new leaf in my life – while hidden amidst the leaves of a certain mighty apple tree – I saw myself changing for the better. I didn't feel as anxious anymore, and I was constantly filled with resolve unlike ever before. With Miste by my side, her love giving me strength, I was happier than I ever thought possible.

After finishing school, I asked for a job from the alaxdrite mines. It was something to tide me over until Miste and I would be old enough to take the Adventurer trial. Getting to spend more time with Miste each day didn't hurt either.

Peace and quiet returned to our family as soon as Kai and mom sat down and talked things through properly. Although, I still think mom never quite got over Kai's decisions fully. Neither of them ever said anything, but I could feel the air between them remaining rather breezy, more so than prior.

Before any of us knew, the time for Kai's departure to the Knight Academy in Magna Crux was upon us…

Miste and I saw Kai to the far end of Akrelion, where the hills of white roses gave way for thick woodlands of pine, pierced by a small trail leading towards south – it was the very same trail Miste and I would walk one day. Mom and dad had stayed home, having said their farewells prior that morning. Mom

wouldn't be able to handle seeing Kai marching off into the distance.

"This is it. Time sure went by in a flash…"

Kai snatched both me and Miste inside his embrace, ruffling my hair for one last time.

"Miste, thank you for everything. I trust you to keep this knucklehead in one piece for me."

"Leave it to me! Have a safe trip."

"And Zeriah… don't you dare start slacking off while I'm not around to whip your butt!"

"Tch, no worries! You'll be surprised, the next time we meet, I'll be stronger than you knew possible. Better get your own butt ready for some whipping!"

"Hehe, I should expect no less from my little bro."

Kai held me by the shoulder, his grip firm as ever.

"Just remember, there can only be one swordsman standing at the very top. I won't be lazing around either."

"I never expected less from my big bro."

With our friendly rivalry put in place, Kai gave me a gentle nod of approval. After waving his final goodbye, he turned away and marched towards his dream waiting beyond the horizon, not once gazing back.

I remember Miste's hand coiling around mine as silent tears flowed down my cheeks. Watching Kai's back drawing away, I had only one thought swirling in my mind – I hoped that one day I could measure up to my brother, to show him how much his kindness truly meant to me."

VERSE #28: JOINT EFFORT

Across the vast fields of grass surrounding the town of Jotel, each and every strand of green had its tip painted with the color of lustrous gold as the sun kept rising higher, washing over the land with its comforting warmth, and killing any chill that the soft summer breeze might have brought with it.

Zeriah found himself gazing right at the celestial flare, admiring its overbearing brilliance of orange and red. Eventually, the beams grew to banish the shade cast by the great oak he was sitting under. The scorching light made Zeriah avert his eyes.

“So you see, nothing has changed since those days. I’m still the same as always… powerless… and a wimp…”

Reiram snorted scornfully, making Zeriah flinch from surprise. He glanced at the man, waiting for his thoughts. After an embarrassingly long set of seconds, Zeriah realized that the sound of contempt was in fact all that Reiram had to say. The man had remained perfectly silent for the entirety of Zeriah’s story, aiming his back firmly towards him.

After laying his soul naked for his friends to see, Zeriah felt at the same time cleansed and uneasy. Perhaps he had imagined that some kind of revelation would come to meet him while delving into the realm of his memories – a foolish hope.

Dani invited Zeriah’s attention by delivering a snappy flick upon his forehead.

“One thing that *really* hasn’t changed is that you’re being way too hard on yourself, Big-Z!”

Zeriah turned to face Dani, who was sitting right in front of him, almost uncomfortably close. Beside him hovered the projection of Freyja, her naturally radiant presence giving the rays of the sun some true competition. Both Dani and Freyja aimed their most sincerest smiles at Zeriah. The kindness that was shown to him even now – after he was proven time and time again to be a spineless failure – felt unbearable to Zeriah. He slumped his head; the ground being the only place where his gaze could escape the eyes of his companions.

Freyja reached to caress Zeriah's cheek with her palm. Although the boy knew that the ghostly lady wasn't actually there, he could still feel a speck of warm lightning dancing across his skin. Freyja's inviting touch made Zeriah nudge his head upward. The lady astra's look was stern, yet manifesting as a smile.

"Zeriah. The most important part of your tale remains true to this day. You and Miste love each other, whatever may come, and that should be the only thing that truly matters."

Dani nodded repeatedly while humming in approval.

"We've already gone through this; you guys are inseparable! Mystic-M doesn't care if you ain't yet the best sword-swinger you can be or whatever, she simply wants you around, like we all do."

Zeriah knew that Freyja and Dani weren't exactly wrong, and yet…

He shook his head. A hard lump formed inside his throat, making it hard to breathe. The sorrow and fear inside his soul made his eyes wet, he had to grit his teeth to suck in his welling emotions, lest he crumble down right then and there.

“As for me, nothing has changed… However, it’s a different story with Miste…”

Zeriah struggled to hold back his tears, so as not to shame himself further. The strength from his voice sapped away, leaving him sounding like a wounded soldier wheezing out his final words.

“Back when we were simply dreaming of becoming Adventurers, neither of us expected the world to give us such hardship. Miste has grown so much, no matter what was thrown her way, she didn’t give up, and now, she has completely embraced the reality of the world, working diligently to better herself. She has changed so much… unlike me… and in such little time too…”

Zeriah refused to let himself cry; as he kept biting his teeth he eventually broke out laughing instead – a demented, joyless laughter.

“Back in Powderberg, when Miste was fighting Clint, I thought she looked really cool, so strong, so dependable, like a real Adventurer should be… hahaha… She is already more like Kai than I could ever dream of being… and me… hahaha… All I could do to help in her direst hour was scream for her name…”

In the end, Zeriah’s laughter came around full circle and turned into sorrowful weeping.

“I’m just so scared… that if Miste grows too powerful… that eventually she… she will go places… where I can’t follow her… I don’t want to be a burden to her… I don’t…”

“Tch, talk about a bother!!”

Reiram's comment was dripping with disgusted snark. The man took a stabbing look at Zeriah over his shoulder.

"That's your problem right there! You say you wish to become stronger, yet everything that you do, you do it with fear in your heart. If one truly vows themselves to protect someone else, then there is absolutely no room for self-centered thinking. Frankly put, with the way you've announced your dream – becoming the most powerful swordsman to shield Miste – then your only concern should be Miste's happiness, no?"

"That's…"

Reiram's words sounded genuine. His tone was demanding, yet at the same time calm and supportive.

"Do not misunderstand, I'm not doubting your dedication to Miste. However, if you wish to grow as a man, first you need to cast aside all hesitation, it won't do you any good. Whatever may come will come, none of us can predict the future. Once the pages of today have been written and the ink has dried up, and not a moment sooner, should you ever let go of hope. Keep improving, Zeriah, and remember that change comes only with time and patience. You needn't be ready by tomorrow. You share an unbreakable bond with Miste, and she will no doubt support you until you are ready."

As soon as Reiram was done with his advice, he returned to eyeing aimlessly at the distance.

The way Reiram had spoken left Zeriah dumbfounded. He wasn't used to hearing such words from the man. Any genuine advice from Reiram would more often than not be buried beneath a landfill of snark and grumping.

Amidst his mix of emotions, Zeriah suddenly found a tiny thread of optimism dangling in front of him, a rope of hope, dropped inside his well of despair; all he had to do was grab hold of it and climb free.

I've sunk to such depths… to have Reiram be the one talking sense into me… I must look absolutely pathetic! Reiram is right though, I've spent so much time focusing on 'what-ifs', that I've entirely forgotten how well things truly are right now. Miste and I… whether or not we have changed as people, nothing has changed between us. I never want to let her go! I can only hope that my stupidity hasn't made her think any less of me…

Zeriah wiped his face clear and climbed to stand while supporting himself against the great oak. He gave each of his companions a hearty look. His heightened spirit reflected in their smiles.

"Thank you all. And… I'm sorry for being such a bother."

Although Zeriah aimed a large part of his thanks towards Reiram, there was no visible response from the man.

"I will stop worrying too much about my own shortcomings, and simply try my hardest, just like Miste. I'll give my all for her – all that I currently have to give, that is."

Dani slapped Zeriah on the shoulder.

"Yes! There's the *Big-Z* I know! Good to have you back. For a moment there I was worried we'd lost you!"

"Yea, I guess I was quite lost."

Freyja fluttered closer, enclosing the two boys inside her diamond-esque radiance. She leaned against Zeriah's shoulder while beaming with overflowing content.

“I’m so relieved. Ooh, were I able to, I could just kiss you!”

Reiram scoffed at Dani and Freyja frolicking around Zeriah, his expression the definition of deadpan.

“From the way you two are applauding him, you’d think Zeriah managed to pull off something notable. If you ask me, he’s done nothing but waste our time with his emotional constipation. Oh, I am *so* utterly overjoyed that we got to play counselor for an antsy, stripling, would-be-swordsman. I’m simply *bursting* with glee…”

Freyja glided swiftly to meet his grumping partner.

“No one asked you anything, so zip it!”

Zeriah reached for the duo with an apologetic look.

“No, Freyja… Reiram is absolutely right, things should’ve been clear to me from the start. I’m sorry for dragging you all into this, I promise I won’t let it come to this again.”

Dani threw his hands behind his neck while grinning slyly at his elder colleague.

“Bah, Rei-Rei is just being all grump-grump, as per usual! Besides, he’s the one who handled most of the counseling. That was some speech you gave; I got all teary-eyed.”

Reiram grumbled something unintelligible under his breath in response to Dani.

A smile rose on Zeriah’s cheeks. It truly felt like everything was as it should be. He picked up his sword from the ground. A glimpse at the curving blade of the weapon, with sparks of sun dancing along the metal, and two dots of lime-green fire spiking through the brilliance, made Zeriah feel inspired.

This is what I'll strive for, to be unbreakable like platidium! One day, even the hardiest of blades will bow to the might of my resolve!

The young swordsman, refueled with confidence, thrust his weapon callingly towards Reiram.

"Let's stop wasting time, I'm ready to go again. Bring your worst, Reiram!"

The man turned fully around to face Zeriah, with a look that was basically a massive question mark – an irritable and weary question mark.

"Do you have wax in your ears?! What did I just finish telling you? You need to give yourself time to grow, and right now is certainly not the time. You look like a soft breeze could flip you on your back."

"I can do this, you'll see! If I truly focus and forget my fears, you'll be surprised at what I can do."

Zeriah's enthusiastic beaming was met with a trio of doubtful glares.

"I have to agree with Reiram on this one. I'm sorry, Zeriah, don't take this the wrong way, but you look awful…"

"Yup, I'm with Mr. Grumpypants and the Lady. You might wanna consider getting some proper shut eye, Big-Z."

"Huh!? No, no, I'm fine… I can't look *that* bad… can I?"

"Dude, with those black spots around your eyes, you look like a panda! And correct me if I'm wrong – I don't mean to assume – but isn't it easier to hold a sword when your hands aren't jittering like that?"

“What…?”

It was just as Dani had pointed out: Zeriah’s sword hand was trembling as if dunked in a bucket of icy water. After Zeriah got a second to let his heightened spirit settle down a tad, the strain from last night’s training session made itself known tenfold, pummeling him into submission in an instant. Zeriah leaned against the great oak for support as his knees turned into wet noodles.

“On second thought, a bit of rest sounds kinda nice right about now… a lengthy bit of rest…”

Dani sneaked under Zeriah’s arm to support him.

“Heheh! All aboard *Dani Clement’s Special Express*! Next stop: a comfy bed!”

“Thanks, Dani. I’d probably have to crawl on my own.”

“Think nothing of it. You only need to ask, and I’ll always be there for you guys… or rather not ask, since I already know, y’know, because we’re friends, and friends can always sense stuff like this… ah, you know what I mean.”

“Hahaha, yeah, I know!”

The two boys began limping in tandem towards the town, with Reiram pacing beside them.

Freyja fluttered softly past Reiram and placed herself to hover in front of the man. The lady astra aimed a sparkling smirk at her Bearer.

“What is it now, Freyja?”

“Isn’t there still something you wanted to say?”

“No, I don’t think there is.”

“Hmm… But you’re thinking about it, so why not just come out and say it?”

Reiram marched right through Freyja’s ghostly projection.

“Keep your mitts off my thoughts, you spectral harpy!”

“Boo! Don’t be like that! You know I’m just going to keep bothering you until you give in.”

“Grrh… for what dire crime am I being tested so…”

Reiram stopped abruptly, prompting Zeriah and Dani to halt their limping. With a reluctant tone, the man turned to Zeriah.

“Make sure to get plenty of rest for tomorrow. I don’t want to find you in a similarly sorry state as today.”

“What? Do you mean----–”

“Yes, I’ll train with you tomorrow, same time, same place. If you’ve truly grown a spine by then, then I have no qualms about crossing swords with you. I’ll reiterate though, I will not become a teacher for you – this’ll merely be a sparring session between two swordsmen. Are we clear?”

Although Reiram insisted on keeping himself as distant as possible, Zeriah couldn’t help but feel moved by the man’s faith in him. Zeriah channeled all his gratitude into a firm smile in response.

“Yes! Thank you, Reiram!”

* * *

Miste’s right fist pierced the emptiness before her repeatedly. Each of her punches was backed up by a grunt, and each of said grunts gained steadily in volume, sending out a clear message about the girl’s restlessness.

The soft summer breeze whistled through the grove of oak at the northern end of Jotel, creating a subtle symphony of rustling leaves. Normally, Miste would relish the soft sounds of nature, but today, somehow even a little distracting noise like that annoyed her.

Ejrica had instructed Miste on the proper way of maximizing the efficiency of each of her strikes. The current exercise consisted of Miste standing firm, punching the air, and twisting her arm to bring out the full might of her body to every attack. The task was simple, yet focusing on perfecting the exercise was helping Miste to keep her thoughts from drifting too far. Training was exactly what she needed at the moment, anything to keep her occupied. The alternative would be her worrying about Zeriah, and mulling endlessly over their fight from yesterday.

Miste had been unable to get a wink of sleep last night. She'd simply stared at the ceiling of her bedroom, occasionally sobbing silently against her pillow, all alone. Although she'd hoped and begged to be given mercy from her sorrow, she was denied access to the realm of dreams. With all the uncertainty that Miste felt because of Zeriah's weird behavior, the anger she held towards herself over making him upset, the regret for snapping at him, as well as the constant fear of losing the person she loved, at the time, Miste would've gladly welcomed even nightmares, if only to escape her real-world pain.

A hand suddenly clutched Miste's shoulder, lifting her from her trance-like focus.

"Miste?!"

"Gaah! Huh? What now, Ejrica? Did I do it wrong?"

“No, your execution was satisfactory. It’s just that you were getting rather loud, and when I tried to reach you, I didn’t get a response. It was rather unsettling.”

“Sorry, I’ll try to keep it down.”

Miste prepared to continue her exercise, eagerly, for even a tiny moment of distraction managed to lift a flurry of unwanted emotions to whip and whirl inside her.

Ejrica caught hold of Miste’s wrist, giving her a concerned look.

“I believe it would be best if we hold off from further training until you’ve settled down a bit.”

“I’m fine! I want to do this!”

Ejrica tightened her grip, firm and commanding, whilst making sure not to hurt Miste.

“I apologize if I sound disrespectful, Miste, but knowing you, I would prefer if we stopped for the day. I don’t want to see you overexerting yourself.”

“Ejrica…”

Of course, Miste should’ve expected no less. Ejrica had been there to witness her and Zeriah’s falling out. Even though Miste had insisted that she was okay and ready to train, her distress must’ve been way too apparent to ignore.

Miste relaxed her body, prompting Ejrica to release her grip. She slumped down to sit under the shade of a nearby oak tree. She folded her arms while sighing in disgust.

“I’m that obvious, huh?”

“I’m sorry…”

“No, no, it’s not your fault, you’re absolutely right!”

Ejrica lowered herself to kneel gracefully next to Miste. From her expression, Miste could read severe worry and discomfort, no matter how much Ejrica tried to hide it behind a stoic face. Miste felt embarrassed for making her friend anxious, and that didn't exactly help the frustration already swelling inside her.

An uncomfortable moment of silence stretched between the two, all the while a cold string of steel kept slowly coiling around Miste's heart – a malevolent serpent, intent on choking its prey before devouring it.

No matter how much Miste tried, her thoughts refused to move past Zeriah; his angered face and words spat out with venom were firmly imprinted in Miste's mind. The memory of yesterday running through her head at a constant loop made her feel sick.

Why… why did he have to say all those things…? His words… they were so cruel… it's like he was talking to his worst enemy… The person from yesterday was not the Zeri I know…!

The serpent of steel kept wrapping ever tighter around Miste's heart, making her crave to just punch through her own chest and rip her heart away, so that her torture would be over----------. The whirlwind of confusion, worry and fear kept wracking Miste's mind, wearing her down, before finally settling to leave behind seething irritation.

Miste slammed her head against the oak while shrieking out her feelings.

"Gaah! Stupid Zeri!!"

Ejrica tilted her head awkwardly, unable to find a response. Though admittedly, what was there even to say? *Stupid Zeri* was quite the all-encompassing statement.

“I just don’t get it! What is his malfunction?! I thought I was doing something good, but apparently not! Am I really *so* in the wrong for wanting to better myself?! And why did he have to act like everything that ever goes wrong is suddenly my fault, huh, why?!”

Ejrica peered around flustered, like trying to find someone else, anyone else, to take up the conversation.

“I… I cannot say…”

“Like, should I stop training with you? Or stop dreaming about being an Adventurer? Stop caring for anyone around me? Should I just stay glued to Zeri, so that *he* doesn’t have to worry?”

“No… I don’t think that’s right…”

“And how about-–”

“Miste!”

Ejrica bit her lip for a prolonged second, taking a deep breath before continuing.

“I don’t believe I’m the right person you should be seeking guidance from. I’m not that well-versed in this sort of thing…”

It took more of a struggle than Miste would’ve believed to hold her tongue from further foaming. She still had loads on her chest, begging to be let out. Nevertheless, Ejrica was absolutely right; simply spouting her own frustration wouldn’t get Miste anywhere.

“I’m sorry, Ejrica. You must think I’m awful for laying this all on you.”

“Not at all. I truly wish I could help somehow, alas I am at a loss.”

“Why are you both making this out to be *soooo* hard?!”

The third person joining the chat, with a comment sighed out in annoyance, was Sakuya. The tiny astra popped into view from behind Ejrica and fluttered to sit between the two girls.

“This is all *soooo* stupid! Just go and talk to Zeriah, make up, and that will be the end of that!”

Miste had to stop for a second to form a cohesive retort; Sakuya’s blunt take on the matter was rather surprising.

“You make it sound so simple, Sakuya. And what do you mean *Go and make up*? As if this is somehow *my* fault! Zeri is the one who should come to *me* and apologize for acting like a dunce!”

“I didn’t say anything about whose fault it was – although you did lose your temper and kept shouting just as much as Zeriah did.”

“Well, I… uh…”

“You both owe each other an apology, the one who was more in the wrong doesn’t matter here.”

Miste put on a defensive frown while cradling herself tightly within her arms.

“Tsk, it’s not like this is the first time Zeri has been a total dumb-dumb for no good reason…”

“And none of those times has been the last, right?”

“R–Right…”

Sakuya rose to float on Miste’s eye-level. The tiny astra gave Miste an encouraging smile.

“There you have it! Things have always worked out, and they will keep on working out, you know this. Please, go talk to

Zeriah. Don't waste time feeling sad when a simple few words can make it all better."

Sakuya drew closer, staring Miste straight in the eye.

"You guys are my friends, and I want to see my friends *aaaalways* smiling!"

Sakuya's own smile grew more intense, gentle yet unabashedly lustrous, like a flower of unmatched splendor opening up its petals to embrace the warmth of the sun.

Miste gripped her chest in anguish, the string of steel coiling around her heart wasn't about to let go. On the contrary, with her friends showing their honest concern for her and wishing for her happiness, Miste felt like she was letting them down via her own reluctance to simply go and make things better.

"You're right… I know exactly what I should do, it's just that… uhf… I don't know… I guess I got so disappointed. I was so glad and proud to be training with Ejrica, and the way Zeri reacted felt so…"

Miste shook her head to cut herself short. She slammed her fist against her palm with resolve.

"No, it doesn't matter, I have to make things right!"

Sakuya nodded with acceptance and fluttered to droop over Ejrica's shoulder.

"Nicely done, Sakuya, that was some simple yet efficient advice."

"Of course! I may not look like it, but you would do well to remember that I'm actually older than all of you guys put together. I know my stuff, so if you ever need tips on matters of the heart, just ask away, teehee!"

The tiny astra beamed with pride while giggling softly. Although what she said must've been true, it was quite perplexing to think that a creature of such innocence and child-like demeanor could be hundreds of years of age. The astra truly were beings unlike any other in the world.

A prolonged moment of silence settled over the trio of girls – young and ancient alike.

Sakuya threw Miste a shooing look.

"What are you still sitting there for? Go!"

Miste gave her neck an awkward rub while twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

"Well… you see… I haven't exactly decided what to say to Zeri…"

"Oh, for crying out loud!"

Sakuya zoomed to float between Miste and Ejrica. The tiny astra poked her hand towards the indecisive girl with fiery command.

"Ejrica!"

"Huh–Y–Yes!?"

"Grab her!!"

"What?!"

The *What* from both Miste and Ejrica overlapped just a tad.

"We are putting an end to this nonsense right now! Ejrica, you'll snatch Miste and carry her to Zeriah. The lovebirds will talk things through, and they will talk things through *soooo gooood*… and if either of them tries to flee or act up, you are free to knock some sense into them!"

“What’s with the forceful attitude all of a sudden…?”

“I’m sick of this! It’s horrible watching Miste like this! She and Zeriah are so cute together, and I want more cute, and this here isn’t cute, like at all!”

“Uh… thanks… I think…?”

“No more talking, it’s time for action… in the form of talking… anyway… just grab her, Ejrica!”

Ejrica stared at her partner astra for a moment in flusterment before getting up to stand.

“Whoa! Hey, Ejrica… what are you…?”

“Sorry, Miste. I may not quite agree with Sakuya’s violent tendencies, but I too believe that facing things head on and getting it over with is the best course of action.”

Ejrica grabbed Miste by her feet and arms and flung the girl to lay over her shoulders with one effortless motion.

“Gaah! Hey! Let me down! I can walk by myself!”

“Don’t listen to her, Ejrica, she’ll try to run!!”

“No, I won’t!”

“Onward!”

Sakuya thrust her hand triumphantly towards the direction of the town and began leading the way, with Ejrica following behind along her struggling cargo.

“Gaah! Come on, Ejrica, this is insane! Let me go and… whoa, you’re like crazy strong…”

“Settle down, this’ll be over soon.”

“It’s all for your own good, teehee!”

“Somebody help meeeeee!!”

* * *

It took a hefty while from Zeriah to hobble his way back to the inn, even with Dani lending his shoulder as a crutch.

Although his soul had been reignited with determination, that didn’t change the fact that his entire body felt limp and quivery. It was a relief to finally arrive at the entrance of the inn, with the promise of a comfy bed waiting for Zeriah inside.

Reiram walked ahead of the two boys huddling over each other to open the door for them. Just as Reiram’s hand dropped over the doorknob, a voice resounded over the crowd of people pacing through the street, calling the attention of everyone.

“Zeriiiiii!!”

Zigzagging past the sea of people was Ejrica, with Miste flung over her shoulders for some reason. Judging from Miste’s cheery tone, it seemed safe to assume she wasn’t hurt.

Reiram retreated from his plans as a doorman and leaned against the wall of the inn, dropping the brim of his hat to cover his face – with a simple trick he managed to fade out of the limelight, it was like he was never there.

Ejrica’s brisk stride led her to the inn in a matter of seconds. She screeched to a halt right next to Zeriah and dropped Miste to stand within an inch from him.

Dani was the first to sound out his amusement over the peculiar way that the girls had made their entrance.

“I see you’ve taken up a little side business in *public transportation* as well, Ejrica. Maybe you and I should be thinking of some kind of merger?”

Dani tapped Zeriah on the chest, as if presenting his own cargo with pride.

Ejrica averted her gaze from the boy.

“If anything, I’ll be merging my heel with your face.”

“I guess that is a hard *no*, ah-he-he…”

The total brush-off from Ejrica made Dani’s face slump with despair, masked poorly by his fake-spirited chuckling.

Miste’s gaze kept switching erratically between the street and Zeriah, a coy smile hanging on her face.

“Hi, Zeri… Is everything okay?”

Zeriah realized that Miste was mostly puzzled by the way Dani was helping him stand at the moment.

“Yeah, all’s fine. I was just training and kinda ended up overdoing it a bit.”

“Oh, I see…”

The way Miste let the words roll out was a strange mix of concern and nonchalant delivery.

Zeriah took a half-step away from Dani, forcing himself stand on his own quivering feet. He returned Miste’s subtle smile in kind, making Miste’s lips twitch higher in response. Seeing Miste at least somewhat cheerful filled Zeriah with resolve. Things would soon turn for the better.

“I was actually hoping I’d find you here.”

“Is that so?”

Miste’s detached tone was poorly masking her true feelings, a thin dash of red on her cheeks betrayed them.

The two youngsters suddenly blurted out in unison…

“I wanted to–”

…and cut themselves short in similar unison.

Zeriah beat Miste on the second round.

“Can I go first?”

Miste clamped her mouth shut and nodded softly.

Zeriah took half a moment to gather his thoughts, filling the silence with a calming breath.

“I’m so sorry for… well, everything, really. I acted like an idiot yesterday. All the things I said… they… uhm…”

Dani was quick to flick Zeriah on the forehead as his focus started to slip.

“Come on, Big-Z, you had some perfectly fine words just a moment ago, use them!”

Dani backed his guidance with a bouncy grin.

Zeriah took another hefty breath. No matter how much he shared his feelings, it seemed like it never got any easier.

“The truth is… with everything that has happened lately, I feel like I’ve failed to keep my promise of protecting you. If I was stronger, you wouldn’t have to worry over anyone else getting hurt, and you could simply focus on enjoying your journey.”

Miste was about to say something, but Zeriah countered the incoming interruption by adding a bit of volume and snap into his words.

“…And I know you do not think like that, I know you’d never resent me. As for your desire to become stronger, helping others

just comes naturally to you, I get it. It's a part of you, its the reason why I love you so much… why I've *always* loved you… I admit it, this whole mess is my fault. I felt useless, and lashed at you for no other reason except for me feeling so useless. I'm really sorry, Miste."

Zeriah took yet another deep breath.

"I guess this sounds quite horrible when I say it, but… I want you to need me, Miste. I want to be someone who can fill that special place in your life, like no other person can, the way you do to me."

"I *do* need you, Zeri…"

Miste leaned to hug Zeriah.

"I can't imagine my life without you!"

The girl's nuzzling got her buried tightly against Zeriah's chest, her cheeks pulsing with warmth.

"You are my hero, and I'll never let go of you, no matter what!"

"So, does that mean you forgive me?"

"Are you stupid!? Of course I do!"

Miste lifted her gaze. A peppy smile was drawn across her face. She tapped her finger against Zeriah's chest and slid it slowly up and down.

"I've always thought that… whenever you practice swordplay, you look real cool. I like that part of you, when you act all confident, because I know that's who you really are. I've always seen you as super strong, dashing, and all around awesome. You make me feel safe."

"Miste…"

“And just like you make me feel so safe and loved, I want to do the same to you, Zeri. I want to be strong too, so that I can keep you forever beside me. You deserve someone taking care of you, just as much as I do…”

Miste’s smile trembled and her eyes got wet as she stared intently at Zeriah.

“We made a promise… remember? We promised to become Adventurers, *together*. That means facing everything that the world has to offer, the good and the bad, as one.”

A thin trail of tears poured down Miste’s cheeks, while at the same time her smile stretched wide with heartfelt joy. A short giggle declared her feelings.

“I love you, Zeri! I feel like the luckiest girl in the whole entire world for being cherished by you!”

Miste clasped Zeriah’s cheeks inside her palms.

“I’m sorry for making you doubt yourself. I want you to know that I believe in your strength and your dream, just like you’ve always believed in mine.”

Zeriah responded by locking Miste’s hands inside his own.

“You don’t have to apologize for something silly like that, I bring my doubts upon myself, I realize that now. Don’t worry, I’m done doubting. It took me hitting rock bottom, but I’m okay now.”

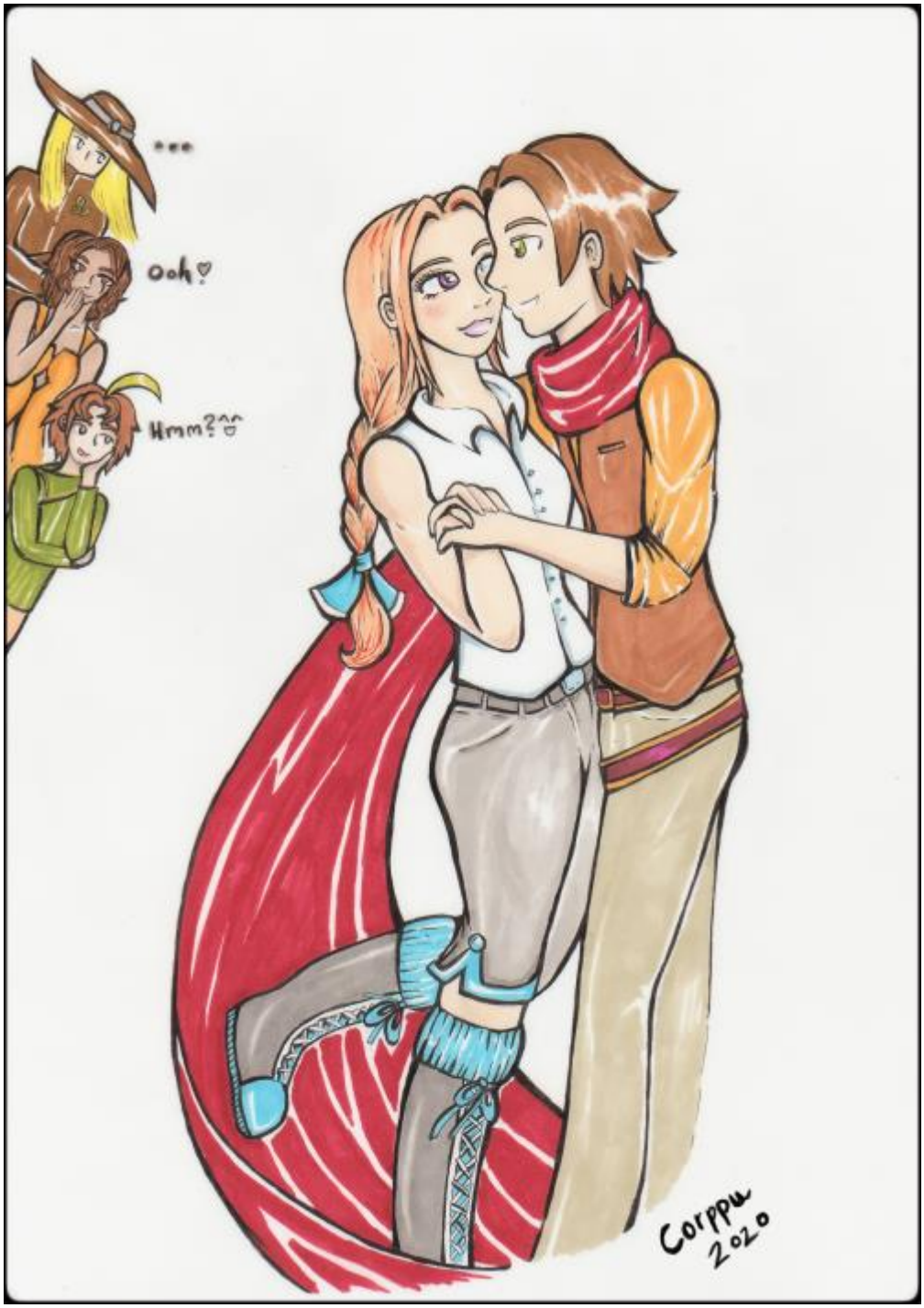
A steely grin rose on Zeriah’s lips.

“I will become the greatest swordsman in history, no matter how long it takes. Look forward to it!”

The poise oozing from Zeriah got reflected in Miste's playful smirk.

"I can't wait!"

The couple let themselves sink deeper and deeper within each other's eyes, indulging fully in the passion they held for one another. With a soft kiss, all the sorrow and pain of the past day melted away, becoming meaningless. To these two souls bound as one, only what lied beyond the unknown morrow carried true weight, for that was where their dreams remained awaiting.



VERSE #29: THE BEST WAY TO TRAIN

The next morning, Miste and Zeriah got up early, together. After a quick bite of breakfast, the two parted ways at the front of the inn, heading towards the opposite ends of the town where their respective teachers were waiting.

“Give it everything you got today, Zeri!”

Zeriah threw a teasingly snarky look at Miste.

“Only if you promise to do the same!”

“Of course!”

After an energetic wave, Miste dashed off. Zeriah spent a moment looking after the girl before turning away himself.

* * *

Reiram waited for Zeriah on the southern end of Jotel, underneath the shade of the lone great oak. The man was in the middle of warming up, mighty swings of his edge-rifle sliced the air with enough force to make the crown of the oak rustle in sync.

Reiram had thrown aside his trench coat and hat. The garment laid neatly folded by the root of the great oak. Seeing Reiram lacking his iconic murky attire, now only wearing his clear-white shirt, while his golden hair fluttered freely along the whimsies of the wind, made the man look like a completely different person. Zeriah was hesitant to call Reiram’s appearance inviting, though it certainly seemed that he wasn’t exactly appalled by the idea of flexing his skills with the fledgling swordsman; the man’s usually stern and detached expression had adopted a glint of free-flowing energy.

Invited or not, Zeriah doubled his pace for the final stretch.

“Morning! Hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

Reiram kept his focus on his warmup, grinning out his answer with an amused tone.

“You make it sound like it was *I* who was desperately begging for a chance to get stomped.”

Zeriah shrugged off the jab with a jokey scowl.

“Foolish me for expecting anything else for an answer. Forget that I asked.”

Reiram walked a few paces farther from Zeriah, stepping out of the shade of the oak. As the sun splashed its golden radiance over Reiram, he got shown to Zeriah in literally new light. The beautiful frame that his clothing gathered in the natural light, coupled with the sharp blue in his gaze that got brought out with almost disturbing intensity, had Reiram looking exalted, regal even. With his usual garb of dusk cast aside, Reiram had an unmatched air of lightness and nobility to him, as far as looks went anyway.

During his travels with everyone, Zeriah had been struggling to pin down what Reiram was actually all about. On one hand, he was a snarking, grumping, pain to be around with, really not a people person. And yet, whenever any of his companions were truly in trouble, Reiram never hesitated to step up and help. In a way, the light that flared all over him acted as a visual representation of that side of him.

Reiram dropped his edge-rifle into a low-hanging stance. The man tended to begin duels by leaving himself wide open, as if calling his opponent to *Take their best shot*; one couldn’t deny the innate confidence oozing from him.

“We’ll begin at your ready, Zeriah.”

“Right, here goes.”

Zeriah grabbed the handle of his sword with an iron-infused grip. A single swing brought the weapon from hanging on his waist and into pointing triumphantly forward. No matter how many times Zeriah drew his weapon, he never ceased feeling a tad giddy when hearing the satisfying sound of metal rasping against wood.

Zeriah's one-of-a-kind weapon, designed especially for him by Miste, was far more than just a piece of armament; his sword acted as the symbol of the faith placed on him by his loved ones, a reminder of the things he wished to protect, and of the reasons his resolve absolutely could not waver.

Zeriah gave his dueling partner a poised look from behind his weapon's curving blade. His blazing enthusiasm got returned by Reiram with a subdued nod in approval.

Just as Zeriah took a step towards Reiram, a crackle of wood resounded above him. With a shower of leaves and twigs falling in his wake, Dani came crashing down from the tree next to Zeriah, making the swordsman stumble and nearly fall over from surprise.

"What the heck!?"

"Ouch…! Definitely not a good spot to doze off… Sorry, Big-Z, didn't mean to crash in unannounced."

Dani bounced back on his feet with a nimble roll and beamed his usual sprightly grin at Zeriah, before breaking into a bellowing yawn.

"What are you doing here, Dani?"

"I think the question should rather be: *What wouldn't I be doing here?*"

Dani gave Zeriah a playful nudge on the shoulder.

“You didn’t actually think I was going to let you guys just cling and chime away with your swords without someone cheering you on, now did you?”

“Um… that… didn’t actually even cross my mind.”

“Huh? Well, that’s okay, here I am anyways, consider me as a bonus. It’s even more than you wished for, lucky you!”

The self-congratulatory grin plastered on Dani’s face made Zeriah give a short laugh in response.

“Hahah, I truly am lucky, in so many wonderful ways.”

Dani threw his arm around Zeriah’s shoulder in an affectionate way, his soft smirk told Zeriah that he felt exactly the same.

Dani turned his attention towards Reiram.

“Seeing as Big-Z is the clear underdog here, I’ll be throwing most of my *Go, go!* and *Keep at it!* his way, but don’t be alarmed, Rei-Rei, I love you guys both equally as much.”

Dani’s bubbliness had Reiram rubbing his brow – he suddenly seemed a tad tired.

“Yippee… that is certainly reassuring to know…”

Reiram’s sardonic tone was amplified with a silent sigh.

The honesty in Dani’s statement made Zeriah squirm a tad from embarrassment.

There was a time when Zeriah couldn’t have imagined himself surrounded by so many awesome friends, with his soul laid bare for all of them to see, all the good of it along with the bad. Now that his true self had been revealed, Zeriah felt liberated.

He didn’t have to put on a show, nor act like he was anything more than he was.

For the time being, Zeriah’s dream was incomplete, but he would not let that fact hinder him, not anymore. He knew that his friends would be there to cheer him on every step of the way.

Everyone, I won’t let your faith in me go to waste. It’ll take time, but I have no shortage of that; one day, I am going to be the greatest swordsman in history!

The next hour or so went by in a flash, with a simple pattern repeating in an endless loop; Zeriah would lunge at Reiram and get blocked effortlessly by the man, after which Reiram would counter attack, either by swiping Zeriah’s weapon aside or by serving him a healthy meal of knuckle-sandwich.

On each loop, Reiram restricted his movements to a couple of bouncy and defensive steps. Compared to their duel back in Llyra, Reiram was clearly holding back – holding back even more, that is – yet he managed to stand victorious at the end of each skirmish regardless.

Reiram’s expression remained deadpan the entire time, there was no scorn or taunting, nor looks of triumph over his opponent. Each time that Zeriah failed to impress Reiram with his skills and got his butt promptly handed to him, the man simply barked a detached command – *Again*.

No matter what Zeriah tried, Reiram always found an opening in his pattern and punished him immediately.

Zeriah’s lack of progress didn’t stop Dani from giving his all to cheer him.

“Good hustle! Go, go! Swing, stab, slash ‘n’ dash! Don’t let up!”

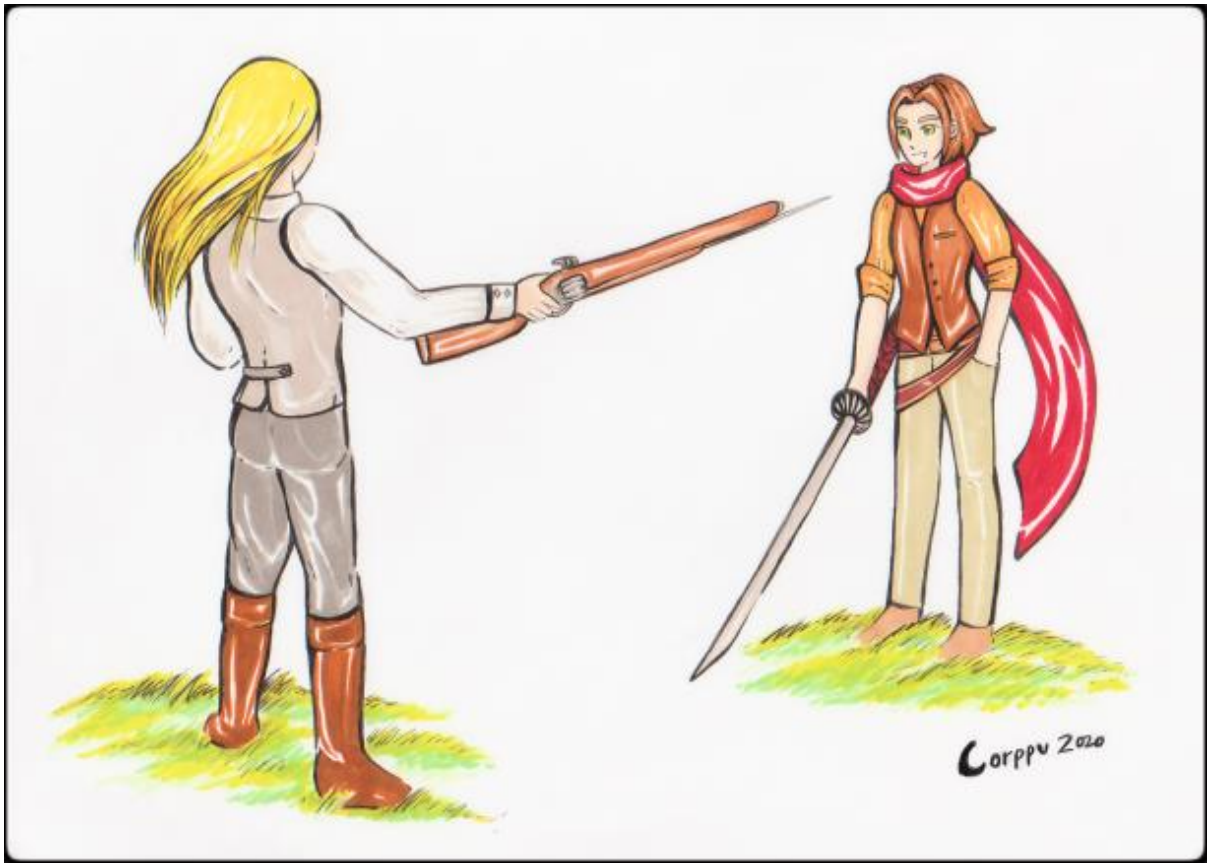
Although sparring with Reiram wasn't quite the same as the times Zeriah had spent practicing with Kai, the feeling Zeriah got from clashing his weapon with another person was eerily similar. The way each of their movements affected the other, directing the angle of their blades, the direction of their next step, the sway of their bodies, it all came together to give Zeriah the sensation of sharing his passion with another person. The metal-infused game of tag was exhilarating; each loop gave Zeriah something new to consider. It certainly trumped swinging his sword aimlessly by himself.

As Zeriah was climbing up after yet another clash ending in his defeat, he got startled by Reiram barking out something other than the expected *Again*.

"You telegraph your movements too much!"

Zeriah was left gawking at Reiram in disbelief, unsure if he'd simply hallucinated his advice.

Reiram moved his edge-rifle slowly in a wide arc in front of him.



“You constantly try to pack as much power to each of your swings as you can, failing to recognize that swordplay is more often about speed and reflex. You’re making yourself predictable.”

Reiram lowered his weapon to point towards the ground while throwing his index finger to jab at Zeriah.

“It isn’t enough to simply react to your opponent, you need to plan ahead, try to guide your opponent’s movements to an advantageous position for *you*. These things need to happen instinctively, make snappy plays, wait for the right moment, then strike like lightning from clear blue sky.”

The man aimed his finger towards Zeriah’s sword.

“You do a disservice to your weapon by not capitalizing on its strengths. Your sword is light, it is designed to be nimble. Yet the way you try to handle it is closer to a claymore.”

It pained Zeriah to admit it, but Reiram was right. The twin platidium blades of Zeriah's sword were alone worth a fortune, not to mention all the love and effort that had gone into forging them. It was a weapon fitting a master; it deserved at least a competent wielder.

"Thanks for the tip, I'll try doing better."

Reiram shrugged impartially.

"It is painfully clear that you've never had true discipline in training."

"Yeah… me and Kai were basically just two kids whacking each other with sticks."

Reiram nudged his head in subtle approval. He gave his weapon a swing with a commanding vibe.

"Again!"

Zeriah did his best to take Reiram's advice to heart. The way of fighting he had described sounded awesome. The boy switched his efforts into making his movements swifter, rather than packing in excess power.

It took a few times of getting promptly knocked off his feet, but eventually Zeriah got the hang of it.

Clash by clash, with every swing of his weapon, Zeriah's mind and body melded into one. The flow of the duel took over the boy entirely. Soon, he wasn't thinking at all, or at the least didn't fully register any of his actions until he'd already moved three motions ahead. The difference in the way his sword twirled before him was awestriking, Zeriah never knew he could move with such speed and precision.

His tiny improvements didn't help him overpower Reiram, not even close, but eventually, the loops of Zeriah getting knocked down, climbing up, clashing with Reiram and getting knocked down again, grew longer.

Ultimately, the two swordsmen engaged in an exchange of strikes that lasted several minutes uninterrupted. Zeriah broke into smiling once he realized that he'd driven Reiram into a stalemate; the man couldn't break free from the boy's assault, at least not without removing whatever limit to his skill he'd set for himself.

Zeriah's grin got promptly shattered by the stock of Reiram's edge-rifle slamming against his face. Somehow, Reiram had managed to jam the tip of Zeriah's sword inside the rifle's trigger, yank the blade off Zeriah's hand, and deliver the finishing blow across the boy's face with his own weapon.

"Don't get cocky, kiddo!"

Zeriah flew on his back, coughing and wheezing for air while the adrenalin accumulated in his veins made his heart swell and ripple erratically. A nauseating rustle filled his head, like someone was bashing a cymbal right by his ear.

A while of reeling later, Zeriah heard Reiram's voice reaching out to him.

"Here."

Reiram extended his hand to help Zeriah back up, for the first time ever.

As Zeriah took his hand, the corner of Reiram's lip lifted slightly. The man's smile was usually reserved for condescending smirks, but at the moment, Zeriah could tell that the elder

Adventurer was genuinely pleased. The gleam in his eyes was exactly like Kai's.

"That was a marked improvement indeed."

"You really think so?"

"Hm? You don't agree?"

"No, no, it's not that… it's just kinda bizarre hearing praise from you."

Reiram paced past Zeriah and towards the great oak, his step a tad hurried, like he was trying to escape from the boy.

"Tch, I imagine it to be just as bizarre as seeing a stripling swordsman like you showing advancement of any sort."

"Ah, now *that* sounded more familiar."

Dani marched to meet Reiram while lifting his palm in greeting.

"That was quite the spectacle, call me impressed! Put it there, Rei-Rei!"

Reiram ignored his colleague's frolicking and strode right past him to collect his coat and hat.

"…or don't, that works too."

Dani dropped his hand in disappointment and turned his focus on Zeriah.

"Awesome going, Big-Z, that was some fierce hustle at the end!"

"Thanks, I'm glad the effort shows."

"It's not like I know anything about swordplay, but at least to me it looked impressive. I tell ya, I was chewing my nails the entire time… They taste worse than you'd think."

“Way more info than I needed to know…”

Reiram flung his trench coat to veil his shoulders. He looked like himself once more. The man aimed his attention to Zeriah. An emphatic glint shot from his eyes before he dropped his hat to shade his face.

“Same time tomorrow.”

Reiram started towards the direction of the town.

Zeriah took a couple of running steps to catch up to the man. It was kinda silly, but the sudden way Reiram made his leave left Zeriah flustered.

“Wait, Reiram!”

“What is it now?”

“I… just wanted to… uh… like…”

“Yes, yes, those certainly are words, now if you’d simply put them together cohesively.”

“Sorry… What I wanted to say was *thank you*, really. I can’t fully express how much your help means to me.”

Reiram glanced at Zeriah briefly past his shoulder.

“Think nothing of it.”

“No, your pointers were awesome! With such little steering from you, I can already feel how much stronger I’m growing.”

Reiram tugged the brim of his hat lower.

“I merely grew tired of watching you fail constantly, it’s just that, nothing more. Don’t start forming any weird ideas.”

“Yeah, I get it, I’m not expecting you to suddenly turn into a teacher or anything.”

“Good.”

“About that though…”

Reiram shuddered, expecting Zeriah to start begging for the man to reconsider his request for paid tutoring. In the end, Zeriah had something else on his mind.

“…I apologize for acting disrespectful, with the way I tried shoving my money down your throat earlier, as if I could just buy my way out of my woes. I shouldn’t have been so abrasive about it. I hope you don’t see me as some spoiled prick because of it.”

Reiram turned to face the boy. He studied Zeriah’s expression for a moment before breaking out with a weary sigh.

“What a bother…”

The man’s gaze steeled up, a pair of sapphires drilled at Zeriah, piercing through the boy with such intensity that he could feel it on the back of his skull.

“I’ll say this only once, so clean up those ears and listen. None of you needeth hold worry over me, nor should you be concerned about how I perceive any of you. These things are of absolutely no consequence. Whatever you may *think* that you feel for me… you’d do well to remember that I won’t be around forever. Once we reach the Capital, our paths will diverge.”

The gleam in Reiram’s gaze evoked a sense of heartfelt pleading, though hidden behind an intimidating wall, one telling Zeriah to *Back off*.

“I know all of that. Sorry, I guess I was only speaking to calm my own guilt. I’ve hurt so many people in the past with my thoughtlessness, so I figured the least I should do is apologize.”

Reiram sighed again.

“Zeriah. The mere fact that you can admit yourself being wrong proves that you are stronger than most of the men I’ve come across.”

Reiram raised his voice a bit to cut Zeriah off from responding.

“Now, aim that strength to support the person you love!”

Reiram’s hand dropped on Zeriah’s shoulder. The iron grip made the boy shudder, for the sensation was uncannily similar to the way Kai would hold him.

“Never let *her* go, no matter what happens.”

After giving Zeriah a somber smile, Reiram turned away. A second passed before Zeriah could fully shake himself free of the surprise that the man’s sudden shift in demeanor had left him in.

“I won’t! Never! You can bet everything you have that I won’t!”

Reiram waved his hand lazily while marching away, signaling the conversation as ended.

Dani paced softly to the scene, as if he’d been waiting for the two swordsmen to be done talking.

“I can see you know your stuff when it comes to mining, Big-Z.”

“What? How do you mean?”

“Well, you certainly managed to *dig* some genuine feelings out of Rei-Rei.”

The two boys broke out chuckling in unison.

A warm sensation caressed Zeriah’s heart as he thought over the last few days.

It's ridiculous to think how pathetic I was acting just a while back, cos now everything's working out awesome. It feels like every moment I breathe just keeps pouring more and more fuel to my soul, it's like I'm burning from the inside. This is it, I'll hold on to this feeling. If I keep pushing myself like this, step by step, I will grow stronger. Nothing will hold me back ever again!

A growling murmur rose from Zeriah's stomach.

"Wow! You took the words right out of my tummy, Big-Z. I tell ya, watching you and Rei-Rei go at it built up a healthy appetite. I can only imagine how you must be faring."

The void inside Zeriah's stomach was vast enough he felt like he might implode on the spot.

"I could eat, yeah."

"Then what's the hold up? Let's get rolling!"

Zeriah and Dani started towards the town in the wake of Reiram.

* * *

On the other side of Jotel, Miste was currently deeply absorbed in her own training.

Ejrica had decided the control over one's own mind – a skill she dictated equally as important to a warrior as physical strength – as the agenda for today's training. As such, the girls had spent the morning sitting silently face to face, eyes closed, while concentrating their senses towards a higher level of receptiveness.

Miste had never tried meditating before, though the chance for new experiences made her more than eager to give it a try.

Ejrica had instructed Miste to do her best not to let her mind drift on any flights of fancy, a task that at first seemed impossible. The exotic lady's advice to Miste was to first focus on her own breathing, to overemphasize the flow of air slithering in and out; a crude solution, but one proving effective in the end.

Before long, all of Miste's excess thoughts dissipated. In their place, the infinite individual sensations of soft tickling and caressing against her skin sharpened tenfold. The sun's warmth merged with the fresh wind to create a dance of vibrations all over her body. With her mind wrung dry of thought, Miste was able to sense even the most minor changes in her surroundings: a single leaf falling from the oak behind her, the way Ejrica's hair fluttered in the wind, and the exact shift in the angle of the sun as it beamed on her forehead.

As Miste's senses kept heightening, while her mind sank deeper inside perfect emptiness, a sharp azure flare twinkled itself into existence over the canvas of black before her. The light pulsated in steady rhythm, mimicking Miste's heartbeat. With each pulse, the blue before her mind's eye grew in intensity, yet not aggressively, more like it was asking to embrace the girl fully. Miste decided to indulge the request.

A fiery bolt of lightning exploded throughout Miste's body. The blast crackled out through each of her pores, flowing outward in millions of tiny streams. The flow felt like it cleansed all that was soft and squishy in her body and replaced her entire being with the unbreakable essence of platidium. The sudden pulse of power made Miste want to scream out from the intensity.

The sensation mellowed into a static blaze of energy circling within Miste. Midst the warm tickling, she felt something coiling around her hand, something gentle, yet confident and firm.

Yggdrazil!

Miste opened her eyes to find Ejrica holding her right hand. The blue alaxdrite on Miste's gauntlet shone bright enough to compete with the brilliance of the sun.

Ejrica tilted her head inquiringly.

"You look like you were expecting someone else."

"I… I felt Yggdrazil's presence! It was real intense. Sorry, I got distracted, should we try again?"

Ejrica smiled at Miste with a hint of craftiness.

"I believe you did rather well already."

"Huh?"

Only then did Miste notice that the blue glow from the alaxdrite had encircled her completely. The girl was engulfed inside a field of energy reminiscent of azure flames – though instead of smoke, there were thin flakes of condensed energy floating towards the sky.

"Wha–Whaaat!? Gaah!"

After a second or two of fidgeting, Miste regained her cool.

"This is Yggdrazil's power alright… but I didn't activate it… at least… I don't think so?"

"My guess is that by emptying your mind, you were able to draw closer to Yggdrazil."

“Yeah… it kinda felt like I was letting him merge with me. Is that how it feels for you other Bearers?”

“I can’t say for certain, it might be different for each individual, though I myself can sense Sakuya’s presence constantly within me.”

Ejrica made a soothing gesture with her hand.

“You might want to calm the flow of essence for the time being.”

“Ah, right!”

Normally it took Miste a moment of concentrating to call forth her partner’s astral ability, but now conversely, it took decisive effort to shut it down.

Ejrica nodded in approval as Miste put out the flames of energy.

“This is good, I was hoping for something like this.”

“Hmm? How so?”

“The purpose of meditating is to make yourself more aware, more receptive, to find the center of your own being, so that you can truly harness that which lies within to fuel your actions. What you’ve showcased now is, I believe, a visual representation of that center. If I may be so bold, I’d even suggest that the thing which fuels Yggdrazil’s power is nothing less than your essence.”

“Essence?”

“*The essence* – it is the term many scholars in Serestria use to describe the building material of the world. It is often considered as the combination of physical material and the intangible force that governs the laws of physics. In your language, the term *energy* is close to it. Like energy, it is believed

that essence can't be created, nor destroyed, it merely changes form. It is the administrative force behind human strength, birth and death, life and anti-life, the whole universe. There are also branches of academics who consider each human being as a sort of separate micro universe, with their own pools of essence, and the body acting as a shell that contains the essence. Those branches also believe that astra are creatures built solely of essence, and merely lack the physical shell, which gives them the ability to merge with the essence of other beings…"

Ejrica shook her head, a bit embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I must be boring you."

"Are you kidding!? That sounds fascinating. I've never read up much on philosophy or physiology or such, so this is all new to me."

Earlier, Ejrica had been most interested to learn about Yggdrazil's ability; how the flow of energy from within Miste could be channeled out to form solid objects. Miste could understand Ejrica's fascination perfectly, seeing as Yggdrazil's power seemed to embody the teachings behind Serestrian worldview.

Ejrica threw her hand above her head in dismissive fashion.

"All of this is of course simply speculatory."

"Even so! All ideas are speculation until proven right, right?"

"Quite."

Miste leaned her cheek against her palm in ponder.

"I think what you said fits pretty well with everything I know about Yggdrazil's astral ability. If we're to assume it's essence

that fuels the ability, it makes sense why I get so tired when using it a lot."

"It relates soundly with Sakuya's astral ability as well. I always try to imagine each strike from my foes as them releasing a bit of their essence, which I can then absorb within me and reroute back at them."

By all intents and purposes, the astral ability Ejrica held turned her into a living superconductor – a thought that made Miste smile internally.

"This is awesome! I was kinda hoping that training with you would lead to something like this. The way the essence just bubbled through me felt so effortless. Thank you, Ejrica."

"Don't thank me just yet, we have yet to start proper."

"There's more?!"

"Very much so."

Ejrica reached underneath her tunic and pulled out a piece of rolled-up parchment, along a thin paintbrush and a teensy-tiny bottle of ink. She placed the objects into a neat row in front of her.

Miste scanned Ejrica's slim-fitting outfit with disbelief.

"Where exactly were you hiding all that stuff?"

"Never mind that."

The exotic lady dipped the brush into the bottle and let it drink deep from the pitch-dark ink.

"Before we continue further with your training, I'd like to try out something… different."

Miste was left hanging with her curiosity ignited – Ejrica moved her brush to hover over the parchment and then stopped for a prolonged moment. She closed her eyes, breathing in softly. With a silent exhale, she dropped the tip of her brush against the white canvas. Her eyelids slammed wide open, and in the same instant, she drew a large circle over the canvas with a single twirl of her wrist.

The shape was perfectly round. The brushstroke had left a sharp outline, thick with ink, the end result oozed with confidence and strength wielded by the painter.

“What is this?”

“In our tradition, this is called *ensō*. It is a meditative exercise with the purpose of both self-reflecting and readying oneself before a creative task.”

Ejrica offered the brush to Miste.

“Go ahead.”

“Uhm… what exactly am I supposed to do?”

“First, relax and try to empty your mind, just like you did a moment ago. Then, when you feel like you’re ready, simply draw a circle using a single stroke. Take as much or little time as you think you need.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a try!”

Miste closed her eyes and calmed her mind like before. This time, it took considerably less effort to reach the same state of ease.

As the darkness before her eyes started flickering blue once more by Yggdrazil’s presence, Miste’s lips curled into a wide

grin. Though she couldn't directly talk to him, she knew Yggdrazil was always close and looking after her.

Miste gripped tightly of the brush while opening her eyes. The natural light bouncing off the parchment made its whiteness near blinding. There was plenty of room to paint next to Ejrica's circle.

With one final soothing breath, Miste lowered the brush over the canvas. She slid the brush with slow, methodical touch, until the ink had come full circle.

The end result differed vastly from Ejrica's example. Its shape wasn't quite a perfect circle, more like an oval, with a greatly thinner silhouette. The outer edge overlapped a tad with Ejrica's drawing.

"Hmm… it doesn't look right."

Ejrica shook her head with a smile.

"No, it is perfect."

"Huh?"

"Each ensō is meant to represent a singular moment in time, immortalized in the form of a painting. Whatever the end result may be, it is always a reflection of that moment, of you, Miste."

"I see…"

On further examination, the charm of the two circles combining was rather quirky. If Miste was to try and replicate her drawing, she felt it would never turn out exactly the same.



“That was fun! Can I do it again?”

“Most times it is an exercise done once per day, like a diary that echoes the mood of the day.”

“Okay, I think I get it. Is drawing ensō a normal part of martial arts training or something?”

Ejrica’s gaze slid softly on the ground, a somber gleam swirling wet in her dark chinchilla-eyes.

“It is something my mother used to do every day before beginning her work. She said it helped her focus her thoughts and invigorate her on the task at hand.”

“What does your mom do?”

“She’s a painter, she specializes in traditional Serestrian mural art.”

“Ooh! Sounds cool! I’d like to see her paintings someday.”

Miste reached out for Ejrica’s hand, making her flinch from surprise.

“M–Miste?”

“I can see why your mom does it, drawing ensō I mean. I too feel like I’m ready to take on anything!”

Miste slid her fingers to cross with Ejrica’s, mimicking the way their ensō had ended up touching.

“It’s awesome of you to share something like this with me. It must mean a lot to you. You love your mom very much, I can see it. Thank you, Ejrica, really, for doing all that you do.”

Ejrica’s gaze wandered for a moment between Miste and the ground. She bit her lip while taking a calming breath.

“You needeth not praise me for anything… truthfully… I am disappointed in myself.”

“What?! Why?!”

“You were so upset earlier about your fight with Zeriah, and I was unable to offer any help…”

“Whaaat…?! No, don’t say that, it’s my fault for getting all of you guys involved in the first place.”

“But I… I mean, we’re friends after all… Haven’t I failed to partake in what you Zirinians call… *girltalk*?”

The word sounded all kinds of hilariously wrong coming from Ejrica. Miste couldn’t help herself and burst out giggling.

The exotic lady was taken aback by the girl's sudden laughter.

"Did I say something funny?"

"…Hihihi… I'm sorry, that was just too cute!"

"Cute?"

Miste's fingers tightened their grip around Ejrica's hand.

"When I was being awkward, you didn't shun me. Even if you couldn't say anything to help me, you simply were there for me. That's what friends do!"

Miste leaned closer to hug Ejrica. She was about to pull away, though ultimately let Miste squeeze her.

"I've never had a girl of my age as a friend before, so I'm super glad you manage to bear with me. With you, I've learned lots and lots of awesome and interesting things. It's like having a cool big sister!"

"Big sister…"

Miste's heart bounced in glee as she pressed firmly against her friend. A warm red tickled her cheeks while she hummed out a soft giggle.

"I'm so happy that my life is filled with such awesomeness. Even if I'm not an Adventurer yet, with all you guys around, I feel like I'm already living my dream!"

Ejrica's arms fumbled aimlessly for a moment, before settling to rest gently against Miste's back.

"You truly are something else entirely, Miste."

"Hihi, one of a kind!"

The two held their embrace for a while longer, with Ejrica's heartbeat thumping softly against Miste's.

Miste leaned away while grabbing Ejrica by her shoulders.

"Oh, and about that *girltalk* – I prefer chatting about yummy sandwiches and awesome moms and stuff like that over heartaches any day!"

Ejrica responded with a spurt of laughter.

"Hehe, so do I!"

Miste's focus shifted on the parchment between the two of them. The more Miste looked at the two loops painted on the canvas, the more they began to resemble a pair of sisters; the tad peculiar and uneven little sister clinging to the mighty and firm older sister.

"Is it okay if I keep this? I'd like to have a memento of this day."

"Of course, it is only fitting, since it's your first ensō."

"Thanks!"

Miste rolled up the parchment and stuffed it inside her satchel that laid at the root of the oak behind her.

"So, what's up next?"

Ejrica stood up with iron-clad bravado.

"The meditation up till now was simply to ease you in. Now we start our training proper."

Miste met Ejrica with a confident look while thrusting her fist high in the air.

"Alright, I'm pumped-up and ready to go!"

* * *

Ejrica's follow-up exercise consisted of the pair recreating fighting moves that she'd previously shown to Miste, only this time purposefully slowly and methodically. The way the duo ended up stepping, striking and twirling softly in place came to resemble a choreography for a theater play, rather than mock combat.

"Now, as you move, empty your mind just like before, find your center. Once you get a grasp of the essence within you, try to shift it around along your moves, concentrating it on one exact spot at a time. With this method, your moves will pack more punch, and you'll avoid wasting any of your essence."

"I'll try my best."

Ejrica took the lead, keeping her feet nailed firmly on the ground while moving her arms softly from side to side, like pantomiming to pull back the string of a bow. After every fully-tensed string, she turned to face the opposite direction and repeated the move.

Miste followed the example.

With each passing set, Ejrica shifted the moves slowly towards rounder form, her hands embodying the feel of the waves of an ocean.

"Remember to keep your breathing steady. Time the flow of air with your movements, your entire body must act as one."

"Right."

With Miste's arms creating soft waves rocking from side to side and her breath sighing in gentle lullaby, she delved within the deepest place of her being. The familiar presence of Yggdrazil appeared to greet the girl within her emptied mind. The astra's

touch incited the flow of essence in Miste; she let the energy stream a loop around her body before seizing full hold of it. The girl began moving the blazing sensation within her from side to side, mirroring the movements of her arms.

For a while, it felt like the blood within Miste was boiling as her essence shifted back and forth, drawing a constant trail of fire between her arms. Bit by bit, the essence compressed tighter, eventually resembling a tiny superheated marble underneath Miste's skin.

"I think I got it, Ejrica!"

"Excellent. Now, try using Yggdrazil's astral ability to create an energy construct, but use only *just* enough essence, regulate the flow."

"Alright."

The condensed dot of essence rolled effortlessly along Miste's arm and to the tip of her index finger.

The trick to using Yggdrazil's power – as far as Miste had come to realize – was to focus her mind on a powerful thought or image, from which she could draw inspiration to form a physical representation. In theory, the variety of shapes Miste could create was infinite; it all depended on the strength of her own imagination.

Okay, here goes… What should I make…? A fist… or wings… maybe a shield…? Hmm… I could also try something a bit more complex… flex my skills a bit… yeah… that's it…

Miste let her soul bubble out with her deepest desires. The warm and sweet sensation of a lifelong dream gushed to fill her

entire being; the girl drank deep from that nectar and focused her essence to bring her thoughts to life.

Miste was used to handling Yggdrazil's power with much more *oomph*, so to speak, so the task of regulating the flow of essence to conserve her strength proved to be rather mentally taxing. In the end, the girl imagined the condensed pool of essence as a tiny ball of yarn that she could peel open slowly, using only as much as she needed.

The blazing azure energy poured out through the alaxdrite on the back of Miste's hand. Bending to Miste's wishes, the energy drew a thin shape in the air. Miste smirked excitedly as the flow of energy arched, split apart and looped back together just the right way, finally forming the tri-hex symbol of Hex Nova to float in front of her.

"Hah, yes! What do you think, Ejrica?"

"I can certainly sense your enthusiasm. How does the flow of essence feel?"

"It's great! I don't feel drained at all. In fact…"

Miste let even more energy to pour out, creating more hexagonal shapes around the initial three. One by one, the hexes kept piling up and under and around one another to form a large cluster resembling a bee hive.

"…feels like I could go on forever!"

More and more hexes got added to the cluster, making the girl giggle softly.

"Let's see how large I can make it…"

Ejrica reached for Miste with a calming handwave.

“That’s quite enough, tone it down.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be a spoilsport!”

Miste kept admiring her handiwork as the construct of blue energy kept on growing in complexity and size.

Ejrica gripped Miste by her gauntlet, making the girl flinch.

“Shut it down!”

The exotic lady’s dark eyes held no feeling of anger, but her sharp tone was enough to incite vivid memories of Coal in Miste, specifically of the way the girl would get scolded by her adoptive father any time she acted stupid.

Miste cut the flow of essence, and the cluster of blue energy shattered into countless tiny flakes, each one crumbling away into nothingness.

Ejrica sighed in a manner poorly hiding her immense relief. Her hold tightened around Miste’s gauntlet, the girl could feel the strength of Ejrica’s grip even through solid metal.

“Please, Miste, I ask that you heed my advice without backtalk henceforth.”

“O–Okay… Sorry…”

“Do you feel tired?”

“Huh? No, I’m fine, I–”

Just then, the feeling from Miste’s legs vanished. She would’ve crashed hard on her butt, were Ejrica not holding her. Ejrica lowered Miste to sit down softly.

“That’s what I figured.”

The lightness in Miste’s legs spread throughout her body.

“Uuh… I feel a bit woozy…”

“Do you need to lay down?”

“Nah, it’s alright… but why…? I was fine just a moment ago!”

Ejrica kneeled to sit cross-legged next to Miste.

“Once you grasp hold of your essence, the feeling can get intoxicating, you end up ignoring all else, even the state of your own body.”

“Yeah… I guess it’s the same as the time I fought Clint. I didn’t realize how burned out I was until I was already face down in the snow.”

Ejrica took Miste’s hand and brought her palm to collide with her own.

“With each passing moment, we slowly bleed our essence out into the world, and with each strike against our opponent, we make them feel the might of our essence.”

Her fingers slipped between Miste’s.

“Normally, it is only extremely small doses at a time, but you, Miste, are different. With Yggdrazil’s power, you can make your essence flow like a river right out of your body. If such power is used recklessly, you can end up killing yourself in the process.”

A sharp shiver crept through Ejrica’s arm, making Miste’s entire body resonate to the exotic lady’s appalment.

“I’m sorry I made you worry, Ejrica. I was just so excited, I didn’t think straight.”

“It is fine now. I apologize also for getting upset. Regrettably, I can’t teach you how to use your power properly, you must find

your limits yourself. Though promise me you'll be careful from now on!"

"I will."

Ejrica smiled softly and released her grip.

Miste's heart was taken over by curious juxtaposition, for she was at once embarrassed about making Ejrica worry, but also glad to see her genuine reaction upon fearing for her safety. Miste was truly lucky to have such caring friends.

"I know it's a silly question, but… has something like that happened in the past? I mean, has someone been able to drain themselves completely of essence?"

Ejrica's gaze sharpened, her dark eyes thinning to mere dashes of ink.

"Yes."

She turned to peer at the cloudless skies, staring straight at the blaze of the sun. She breathed in softly, taking in the comforting light that washed over her face.

"Eons ago, there was a great battle waged beneath our capital, Arion, within the deepest depths of the catacombs piercing the heart of the earth – it is a place that remains forbidden, sealed away by our forefathers."

"What happened?"

"A man named Xonsu happened. He was a great warrior, hailing from one of the most influential tribes of the nomadic era… that was of course during the time in our history before Serestria had been unified as a kingdom."

"Uh-huh."

“See, Xonsu served as the right hand to his tribe’s warlord, Nem, the one who would end up bringing the tribes of Serestria together and later ascend as the first queen to rule them all. Nem was a fiercely powerful warrior master, ruthless yet wise, with an overflowing essence that rivaled the flares of the sun with its brilliance. Her power was recognized by all, drawing the fascination of people and astra alike. She ended up forging a pact with an astra called Amaterasu, and with their combined wisdom and might they led the united Serestria towards an era of prosperity.”

Ejrica lowered her gaze from the embrace of the sun.

“The stories speak of Xonsu as the shadow cast by Queen Nem’s sun. During the years that he served under her, he’d never leave her side, not before nor since her coronation. As queen Nem worked tirelessly to create a paradise for her subjects, Xonsu was always her most trusted asset, and a dear friend. Many say that it was more than simple loyalty; that Xonsu and Queen Nem were actually lovers. If it were truly so, then their fate would be all the more saddening…”

A shudder flashed across Ejrica’s face as she continued with her tale.

“Xonsu desired strength above all else, so that he could be of use to his queen. Midst Xonsu’s search for power, an astra called Anyx approached him, offering him blessings unlike any mortal had ever witnessed. Naturally, Xonsu took the astra on their offer, hoping to further serve his queen as an Astral Bearer. Little did Xonsu know of his partner’s malicious intentions… Over time, Anyx’s presence seeped into Xonsu’s soul, the dark essence of the astra slowly eating away the once proud warrior, their whispers driving the man into insanity.”

Miste winced in horror. Ejrica's tale ringed true to her, for Miste had in the past witnessed firsthand how powerful an astra's mental grip could be on their Bearer. She wondered how Miranda and Viekas were doing nowadays…

"How awful! Why would Anyx do that to their own partner?"

Ejrica shook her head furiously, as if disbelieving her own story.

"I cannot fathom it myself. It is simply appalling. Though not as much as the so-called *blessing* that Anyx gifted to Xonsu."

Ejrica gripped her chest as a slicing shiver ran through her.

"With the astral ability in his possession, Xonsu could… eat other people's essence."

Ejrica's hand slipped to cover her mouth as she convulsed in disgust.

"Driven mad by Anyx's influence, hundreds fell victim to Xonsu's spree of devouring the innocent, robbing them of but just the tiniest speck of essence, so that they would still remain alive. Not only that, but Xonsu's power also turned all his victims into his slaves, their existence reduced to mere shells, teetering somewhere between life and death. Eventually, Xonsu retreated underground, hiding within Arion's catacombs with his army of husk-puppets. This led to the battle I spoke of, as Queen Nem chased after the man she once called her beloved; she did her best to reason with Xonsu, but alas, his mind had already rotted away. Nem and Amaterasu confronted Xonsu and Anyx in a battle to the death, deep beneath the splendor of our great capital, one that both of the Bearers' efforts had made possible."

Ejrica fell silent for a lengthy while. In the end, Miste reached out to her gingerly.

“How did the battle end?”

“It is almost too fitting. Just as Queen Nem had acted as the sun that shone equal over all the tribes of Serestria, she brought light into the darkness. With Amaterasu’s blessing, Nem gained the astral ability to channel her essence into concentrated light, so that her foes could truly feel her blazing might. The battle between two hardened warriors was furious, lasting for several days uninterrupted, but in the end, Nem stood victorious…”

Ejrica gave Miste a somber look.

“Yet she paid a terrible price. Left with no hope or way out, she drained her entire pool of essence at once, creating a sea of fire to pulse through the catacombs, turning everything within into ash. Both Nem and Xonsu, along the people enslaved by him, found peace and perished inside the blaze of the Queen’s essence.”

“That’s so sad…”

“Serestrian people will never forget Queen Nem’s deeds, or her final gift to our people.”

“Gift?”

“Her essence. Even after hundreds of years, the blaze within the catacombs still burns with everlasting vigor. Queen Nem gave Serestria a second sun, one that shines on our people from within the crust of the earth. Our land is one of eternal summer by the grace of our beloved *Sun Queen*.”

Ejrica finished her tale with a comforting smile.

“Although she was a remarkable person, I never want to see my friend ending up like Queen Nem.”

Miste’s cheeks flickered cheerful red as she returned Ejrica’s smile.

“Yeah, I hear you. Thanks for sharing the story, I never knew Serestria had such fantastical history!”

“It is a tale that is shared over and over again to each of us since birth, I must have heard it dozens of times myself.”

“No wonder you told it so well, I was at the edge of my seat the whole time!”

Miste’s quirky grin had Ejrica chuckling briefly.

“I’m happy you enjoyed it.”

“It was splendid!”

The sun had risen to its highest point, showering the land with soothing warmth. As Miste savored the wonderful sensation of summer’s graces tickling her skin, she couldn’t help but wonder how much more intense the sun in Serestria might feel.

“Your home sounds like such a wonderful place. I’d really like to visit there someday.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance.”

A gurgling echo sounded from the depths of Miste’s stomach.

“Ah… haha… sorry, that’s my tummy telling me to visit a snack-bar.”

“I can’t blame your tummy, you’ve been working diligently the whole morning.”

“So, how did I do today? Don’t hold back, lay it on me.”

“Your progress is rather remarkable in such a short time. There’s still plenty of work ahead, though you should feel proud, you’re very talented.”

Miste gave her belly a playful tap.

“Hear that tummy? Our tutor approves our efforts!”

Ejrica got up on her feet with a single graceful motion.

“I certainly do. Now, about that food…”

“Yes! You don’t have to tell me twice!”

Miste tumbled to stand with a bit less grace. The girls headed towards the end of the field and the sharp incline leading to the town.

Just as the two reached the edge of the slope, an alarmed holler came booming from below.

“Look out above – incoming!!”

Something came whizzing past the two girl’s, too fast to make out. Said *something* dragged a thin wire in its wake. The wire flew high up to the sky, drawing a wide arc past the golden radiance of the sun, before dropping towards one of the oak trees growing at the top of the slope.

The object pulling the wire drilled itself firmly against the side of the tree, and as it did, the wire got yanked tight to form a straight line between the tree and whatever it was that waited down the slope.

In the next instant, Dani appeared at the top of the hill, sliding along the grass while getting reeled forth by the wire connected to his belt. Tufts of grass flew everywhere as Dani’s boots

grinded against the ground. The boy zoomed right towards the two girls.

“Coming through!!”

Miste and Ejrica had just enough time to jump aside before Dani blasted past them.

As Dani got close to the oak, he got pulled up to the crown of the tree. After landing on one of the higher branches, Dani detached his wire-arrow from the side of the tree and turned to gaze at the slope in anticipation.

Only then did the girls notice the object Dani was carrying; the boy held the unmistakable wide-brimmed hat of Reiram with him.

Pronounced stomps came climbing up the slope not long after Dani’s sudden appearance. Reiram marched right past Miste and Ejrica and towards the oak without a proper hello – though admittedly, that wasn’t exactly off-character for him.

Reiram yanked his edge-rifle from its holster and aimed the weapon at the oak where his younger colleague had retreated. An earsplitting sound rippled through the air, making the flock of seagulls circling above the town to squawk in alarm. The shot from the rifle crashed through the branch Dani was standing on.

“Dude! What the hell!? That was actually really dangerous!”

“I already warned you about the hat…”

Another rifle shot pierced Dani’s foothold, sending a burst of splinters flying all around.

“C–Come on Rei-Rei, it was just a joke!”

“Oh really? So is this!”

Reiram sent the final bullet from his tri-chamber weapon to join its kin inside the branch, making Dani yelp and flinch. With a thick puff of flint surrounding him, Reiram immediately opened the rifle’s swing-out cylinder for reloading.

“Uh, Rei-Rei… those *are* wax bullets, right?”

“Sure… let’s go with that…”

The rifle snapped shut with intimidating poignancy.

“Hey, hey, girls, you say something to him!”

“That’s enough, Reiram – I think Dani has learned his lesson already.”

“Let’s not get hasty. I kind of want to see him falling down…”

“Ejrica!?”

“I’m simply being honest.”

“You guys are useless!!!”

“Don’t blame them, you brought this on yourself.”

Reiram took another shot at the branch, making the splintered piece of wood to snap in half. Dani came crashing down like a baby bird after a failed first flight, with the broken branch bonking him on the head in the process.

“Dude… not cool…”

Miste gasped with horror as Dani slumped on his back.

Ejrica remained casual, smirking with strange satisfaction. Sakuya popped on the scene from behind Ejrica and settled to droop over her shoulder while giggling away.

“That was *hilaaaarious*!!”

“It certainly was enjoyable.”

“Uhm… you guys scare me a bit sometimes…”

Reiram walked to his defeated prey and snatched his hat back from the boy. While he was busy adjusting the hat to rest on his head, a crystalline brilliance gathered next to Reiram. Freyja appeared with a flash of light, frowning at the man.

“Did you really have to go that far?”

“Yes, I really did.”

After grimacing at her Bearer, the lady astra fluttered to bow beside Dani.

“Are you alright, dear?”

“I’m okay-ish… Glad to be alive…”

“Thank goodness! Shouldn’t you be apologizing, Reiram?”

“Sure, I’m really sorry to be stuck here with a bunch of dunces.”

Freyja gave Reiram the eye-of-death.

“Keep that up and one day I’m really going to stop speaking to you altogether, how’s that!?”

“Sounds like a well-deserved vacation.”

“Grumpy blockhead…”

“Spectral harpy…”

The Bearer and the astra turned away from one another with a pout.

Miste nudged past Reiram to help Dani back on his feet.

“You should know better than to piss off Reiram on purpose.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s just that he refused to join us otherwise.”

“Join us for what?”

A voice that would bring smile on Miste’s face anytime, anywhere, reached her ears.

“We thought you girls might be hungry by now.”

Zeriah climbed up the slope, carrying hefty paper bags filled with treats and flasks of tea in each hand.

Miste rushed to meet the boy.

“Zeri! How was training?!”

Zeriah smirked with confidence.

“In one word, it was *awesome*! You?”

“Ditto!”

Miste threw herself to hug Zeriah while humming gleefully. The paper bags rustled and clattered as Miste gave Zeriah her biggest squeeze.

“Whoa, whoa! Careful! We don’t want to end up eating off the ground.”

Miste took a savory whiff of the freshly baked bread and slowly cooked pork filling Zeriah’s hands.

“Mmmfwah… I love you so much…”

“Um… Are you talking to me or the food…?”

* * *

The gang settled underneath the shade of an oak – different oak from the one Reiram had splintered – to share a richly-deserved

meal. Amidst stuffing their faces with food, Miste and Zeriah kept sharing stories about their respective training sessions.

“…and then you simply draw a circle; it helps you to pump yourself up before training!”

“Ensō, huh? Sounds interesting, I’d like to try that sometime.”

“You totally should! My training went awesome because of it.”

Ejrica cleared her throat softly to draw Miste’s attention.

“Today’s training was a success because you gave it your all.”

“Hihihi, thanks Ejrica!”

Zeriah ruffled Miste’s hair tenderly.

“Seems to be a pattern with you; you’ll triumph over anything you set your mind on.”

“Aww, thanks Zeri!”

Miste rested her cheek against Zeriah’s shoulder, purring in satisfaction.

Dani made a hasty swallow of his mouthful, managing to just narrowly avoid choking on it.

“I was kinda hoping we’d get to see you girls in action. Hmm, there’s always next time I suppose…?”

The boy laid a sneaky look on Ejrica. The exotic lady returned the gesture with a lift of an eyebrow.

“What are you ogling at?”

“Just thinking about all the rare sights of beauty this world holds…”

Ejrica’s brow nudged a peg higher.

“…Y’know, it’s simply been a while since I last got to see you in your element, Ejrica.”

“You make it sound like my training is all just a show to you.”

“Ah, not just a show – *the* show! It’s impossible to fully explain how much my spirit soars when I get to witness your grace.”

Ejrica poured herself a cup of tea and took a sip of the warm berry blend before responding.

“I would greatly appreciate if you’d keep such thoughts to yourself.”

“Huh?! No *Thank you*? No *Your support means the world to me*?”

Ejrica took another sip of her tea.

“I have been training since I was eight years old, and I’m quite convinced that I’ll continue managing without your approval of my abilities, Dani.”

The exotic lady’s words were like a merciless barrage of spears; Dani twitched in pain and fell flaccidly on his back.

“Y–Yeah… of course you do…”

Zeriah craned his neck for a look at the defeated boy.

“Uh, you okay there?”

“Uh-huh… I’ll just rest here for a while… Maybe a stray lemmingshroo will dig me a hole to crawl into or something…”

Ejrica drilled a sharp leer at Dani.

“What was that?”

“N–Nothing.”

Miste nudged closer to Ejrica with a puzzled look.

“Is everything alright?”

“Everything is exactly as it should be.”

Ejrica emptied her remaining cupful of tea down her throat and poured herself a second filling. She began immediately sipping on her fresh batch with such fervor that Miste knew to back away with no further questions.

Miste turned her focus on Reiram, who had yet to utter a word since the group had sat down to eat. The man peered back at the girl from under the shade of his hat as he sensed the girl’s sunny smile beaming on him.

“Did you need something, Miste?”

“I was just thinking that I should thank you for helping Zeri so much.”

“I’ve already received my fair share of gratitude – any more and I won’t know what to do with it.”

“Hihi, well, you can’t exactly stop me, now can you?”

Miste threw her hands theatrically towards Reiram.

“Here you go, my deepest thanks, all of it!!”

Reiram angled his hat lower to cover his face while sighing annoyedly.

“What a bother…”

Miste kept showering Reiram with her peppy smile, whether the man appreciated her gratitude or not. Miste could never fully express her gratefulness for everything that the elder Adventurer had done for the two young aspiring Adventurers.

“I can’t wait to see all that you’ve learned, Zeri.”

“Honestly, I’m curious to see what your training has amounted to as well.”

“You know… there’s no time like the present, right?”

“What are you getting at?”

“How about a quick spar between the two of us?”

“Huh? I… uh… yeah, sure, I guess… are you sure you’ll be alright though? I don’t want to hurt you.”

Miste bounced to stand while flashing a poised grin at Zeriah.

“Lemme take care of that.”

The alaxdrite on the back of Miste’s hand flared with azure energy as she made her essence flow outward. The girl channeled her essence to form a thin layer all around her body. She gave the armor of energy a playful tap over her chest.

“There, you can whack me all you like and I should be fine.”

“Let’s lose that *should*… How about I keep my sword sheathed and just use the scabbard?”

“Hihi, I’d expect nothing less from you.”

Miste skipped towards the clearing at the middle of the grove of oak. Midway there, she suddenly stopped and turned to face her tutor.

“Is this okay with you, Ejrica?”

“As long as you promise not to overdo it.”

“No worries, I feel full of energy!”

* * *

To Zeriah, the whole thing felt surreal, to say the least. Never could he have imagined to be holding his weapon – sheathed or not – with his opponent before him being the girl of his life.

Looking at Miste, Zeriah couldn't have described the shimmering blaze of azure that encircled her as anything short from breathtaking. The armor made of Miste's own life-essence gave the sense of imposing might, yet somehow perfectly complemented the girl's easygoing nature. Zeriah realized that his predictions had been right on the money this entire time; slowly, but with decisive certainty, Miste was growing stronger each passing day, and becoming more masterful at handling Yggdrazil's power.

Not too long ago, Zeriah would certainly have felt disheartened witnessing Miste's seemingly effortless growth. Now, things were different, *he* was different. Rather than let his insecurities hold him back, Zeriah decided to let Miste's strength act as inspiration towards his own growth, much like how thinking of Kai had always made him feel.

"I won't hold back, you better be ready!"

"Oh, I'm practically the readiest!"

The energy around Miste pulsed out dynamically as she drilled her stance firmly in place. A lively smirk from the girl invited Zeriah to *Come at me and bring it!*

Zeriah leapt forth, striking at Miste's right flank with the sheath of his weapon. Miste caught the attack effortlessly with her arm. The sensation of Zeriah's weapon slamming against the armor of energy felt quirky, springy, like the shell around Miste was giving in just the slightest bit.

Zeriah followed up with a swift set of strikes, each getting blocked by Miste's arms snapping in the way. The way Miste handled Zeriah's assault was impressive; she knew exactly where the next blow would come. Zeriah wouldn't let up however. After keeping at it for a while, he managed to slither past Miste's defense and delivered a sharp jab on her stomach.

There was a break in the exchange as Miste got pushed backwards by the attack. She cradled herself briefly, before shaking off the shock from the strike, and solidified her stance anew. She smiled at Zeriah with a chirpy giggle.

"You're so much faster than before!"

"You… you can tell…?"

"Well, I *have* spent a bunch of years watching you train, after all."

"Right, of course… You were great too, I can see that you haven't been slouching all this time."

Miste's smile morphed into an impish grin.

"Glad you approve. I'll be stepping it up a notch now."

"Huh?!"

Miste dashed towards Zeriah and was upon him in a flash. She started her comeback with a winding punch from the left. As Zeriah brought his weapon to block the attack, Miste suddenly reversed her momentum and kicked herself to twirl in the opposite direction. Zeriah was left fumbling in place by Miste's unexpected shift of motion. The girl stepped inside Zeriah's embrace and drilled her energy-infused palm against his chest, sending a rush of warmth lancing through his body. As Zeriah

got shoved away, Miste grabbed his weapon and yanked it right out of his hand.

Zeriah was stumped by the exchange. Miste had managed to disarm him with such ease, it was rather embarrassing.

“How did you…? I couldn’t do a thing.”

Miste allowed the azure energy around her flicker away.

“Told ya, I’ve been watching you for a long time!”

“You know exactly how I’m going to move… just from watching me?”

Only then did Zeriah truly begin to understand the depth of Miste’s devotion towards him and his training in swordsmanship.

“That’s honestly kinda humbling… It never even crossed my mind that you’d pay such close attention.”

Miste cradled the weapon she’d snatched from Zeriah close to her chest.

“Of course I did, silly. Your dream is to become the best, and I want to help you reach that dream any way I can.”

Zeriah walked close to Miste and placed his hand upon the sword.

“You’ve already done so much. Thank you, Miste.”

He gave Miste a loving rub on the cheek, making a dash of red to rise on the girl’s face.

“You’re *very* welcome.”

“So, wanna go at it a bit longer?”

The azure energy blazed up to surround Miste once more.

“Just try to stop me!”

The couple spent a good while testing each other, trading blows with uncanny enthusiasm.

Each time either of them managed to pierce through and land a decisive hit on their partner, rather than feelings of frustration or hurt, a firm smile was etched on both their faces.

With every exchange, both Miste and Zeriah became more accustomed to fighting one another. Their moves synchronized, getting faster, more intense, giving the other little room to catch their breath, the battle quickly shifting to a dance-like sequence of steps and twirls and leaps and strikes, designed not to harm, but delivered in confidence that their partner would surely catch them.

The couple pulled ever closer, practically coiling around each other in a fiery barrage of blows. Streams of sweat washed down their bodies while their furious hearts kept thumping within inches from one another, eyes locked, the key thrown away, everything around them disappearing, with each jolt of ache created by their strikes only serving to pump more zeal into them.

In the end, as neither of them could hide their exhaustion any longer, Zeriah simply dropped his weapon to rest over Miste’s shoulder, while the girl slid her arm softly around him. The couple leaned against each other’s embrace for support while catching their breath.

The blazing energy around Miste faded away and she nudged tighter against Zeriah, suddenly feeling a lot heavier.

“Sorry, Zeri… I have to… take a tiny break…”

“Oh, really… I could… hah… go on forever…”

“I expected… nothing less from my hero…”

Miste grabbed Zeriah with all the strength she could still muster and whispered softly.

“I had real fun…”

“Me too.”

“I’ve always wanted to be close to you like this. Thank you for sharing your dream with me. I want both of us to grow strong together.”

“Haha, that’s unfair, *I* was going to say that.”

Zeriah held Miste firmly, letting the girl rest in his arms. The wild thumping within both their chests showed no signs of letting up, their hearts were like two people repeatedly fist-bumping.

Another thing sounding out in tandem was a gurgling declaration of appetite from both their bellies.

“Hungry?”

“You really need to ask?”

“A good sparring session tends to do that. I admit, you got me quite drained too.”

“Hmm, well, I hope you mean that in a good way.”

“The best way!”

Zeriah swooped Miste off her feet and into his arms, making the girl let out a surprised yelp that morphed into a giggle.

The couple was welcomed back with warm smiles from their friends as they returned to the shade of the oak tree – their aura pulsing with the essence of an ever-strengthening bond.

VERSE #30: SERENDIPITY

The following days simply rushed by as Miste and Zeriah focused on their training as usual, with one notable change. After consulting with Reiram, Ejrica managed to persuade the elder Adventurer to the idea of holding each of their respective courses together, seeing as how the duel between Miste and Zeriah had prompted *desirable results* in both their growth.

And so it was, as Miste and Zeriah harnessed each other's support to fuel them further, both of them ended up making huge leaps in progress in only a handful of days.

The grove of oak at the top of the riverbank knew little in the ways of dullness as the young dreamers reached towards further heights of strength, with their two teachers pushing them both to constantly outdo themselves – with added support from a certain young eccentric Adventurer who gave his all to act as the best *one-man-cheerleading-squad* that the world had ever seen!

A spark of enthusiasm burned within the group; excitement for the nearing journey, and a thirst to show the world exactly what their efforts had yielded. And yet, even with that feeling in their hearts, as the day of departure towards Magna Crux via riverboat finally arrived, none of them could deny it came a tad too soon.

* * *

The first imposing roar of the foghorn reached the town of Jotel well before anyone could make out the vessel. The only exceptions were the hundreds of gulls gliding above the town. The entire flock of birds rushed to greet the arrivals, likely in hopes of maybe snatching a treat or two from the passengers. Slowly, with a couple more scattered blares of foghorn, the riverboat slid into view.

In all fairness, Calling the riverboat simply a *boat,* instead of a *ship,* was massively understating its magnificence. The vessel was enormous, with its hull reaching the length of over two hundred meters and the width of forty, six separate decks stacked over one another, three hundred cabins, with the capacity to carry over five hundred passengers, along the staff of over a hundred. With its several onboard restaurants, bars, shops, and a bathhouse fully prepared to serve the customers day in and day out, the riverboat was closer to a luxurious resort gliding above the waters, rather than a simple *boat*.

The entirety of the vessel had an inviting feel to it, created with a mix of delicious browns and splashes of warm and soft pink. The ebony and red ivory finishing throughout the riverboat was beyond elegant; whoever had picked the materials certainly had coin to spend.

Adding to the riverboat's undeniable allure was its name, *The Heart of a Journey*, carved with large cursive letters on the side of the vessel between the third and fourth decks.

The riverboat was propelled forth by two enormous paddle wheels on either side of the boat, along a smaller cylinder-shaped wheel at the rear.

A mere glimpse of the glorious vessel would be enough to invoke the feeling of excitement and a longing for adventure in any soul. Long before the entirety of the riverboat had slid into view, Miste had already been engulfed by this overflowing exhilaration. The girl had been the first one to dash to the harbor, right after the first blare of the foghorn had resounded over the town. For the better part of an hour, she had simply sat at the tip of the pier and waited for the riverboat to make its slow approach towards Jotel.

Eventually, the rest of the gang joined Miste at the pier, after the riverboat had already anchored down.

Streams of travelers marched out of the vessel to fill the already-cramped pier while making their way towards the town.

Zeriah shifted next to Miste to ogle at the riverboat.

“Well, there it is. Honestly, I don’t really get what’s so fascinating about it.”

“Are you kidding!? Just look at it, Zeri! It’s so amazingly huge, look at those wheels!”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s impressive an’ stuff. I just don’t quite see it as *an-hour-spent-merely-staring-at-it* amounts of impressive.”

“Well, it’s not all about what’s on the outside.”

“Huh?”

Miste had her usual alax-tech-crazed glint in her eyes.

“Imagine this: in the old days, riverboats like these actually used to run on steam, but after the boom of alaxtech technology, many of the old ships had their interiors disassembled and refitted with new engines.”

“Ooh, so that’s why there’s that pointless chimney with no smoke atop the boat.”

“Exactly! It’s left there to show just how far we’ve come thanks to alaxtech. Uuh… I simply cannot wait to see the engines in action!!”

“Provided they’ll just let you run around freely and fiddle with their stuff.”

“I have high hopes! It makes you think though…”

“What does what?”

Miste pointed at the large paddle wheel on the side of the boat.

“It’s such a simple design…”

Miste performed a cartwheel along the edge of the pier, making Zeriah flinch when she nearly lost her balance. After sticking the landing, Miste smiled at Zeriah reassuringly.

“…I mean, since the invention of *the wheel* – like who know how long ago – there hasn’t been an innovation that would surpass it in design. I guess it comes to show that when something works, it simply does.”

Miste lifted her right arm high, examining her gauntlet against the backdrop of the enormous wheel.

“So much progress has happened throughout history – more than I’ll ever be able to fully fathom. I like to think that the effort, intellect, and hopes of the technicians of old is imbedded in their achievements, like they’re watching over the newer generation, always reminding us that it’s *their* achievements that give us the chance to pursue *our* own passions. It’s just fun being surrounded by stuff like this and think about how much

determination people back then must have had to make all this possible."

"I think I get it. I should expect no less from a hopeless tech-nut."

Miste took Zeriah by the hand.

"But it's not just tech that gets me all giddy. Think about how awesome it is to be right here, right now. This will be the last stretch before Magna Crux, and then… we're as good as Adventurers!! Aren't you at least a little bit pumped!?"

"We *do* have the trial still ahead of us…"

"Bah, it'll be a cinch, I just know it! Now, let's give it big ol' pumping *Wooh!*"

"Wooh…"

"Huh!? Come on, what was that!? That's like a *Wooh*, when we got more shifts at work. No, no, I'm talking about *Wooh*, when you kiss the girl of your dreams!"

"Hahah, I may just need a bit of inspiration for that."

Miste gave Zeriah a crafty wink and a humming giggle.

"Alrighty, one inspiring peck coming right up!"

It wasn't quite just a simple peck, rather a soft embrace filled with love, the perfect kiss.

"WOOH!! Life is great!"

"Hihihi, now that's more like it!"

* * *

Little by little, the crowd of people moved past the pier, leaving the way open to board the riverboat.

“So, shall we go then?”

“You’re the one who’s been sitting here all jazzed up, it’s just proper you go first, Miste.”

The boarding ramp rose up in an extremely sharp angle, with dozens of steps required for one to reach the lowest deck of the riverboat; climbing the narrow and guardrail-less steps gave Miste a slight sense of vertigo. With brisk and wobbly steps, and after a narrowly avoided tumble off the ramp, she eventually made it safely aboard.

Just as soon as Miste got her feet firmly planted against the deck’s polished ebony, someone appeared out of nowhere to clasp Miste’s hand with an enthusiastic handshake, making the girl jump from surprise and nearly end up flipping over the side of the boat.

“Gaah!!”

“Ho-ho-ho, what an energetic young lady, welcome aboard!”

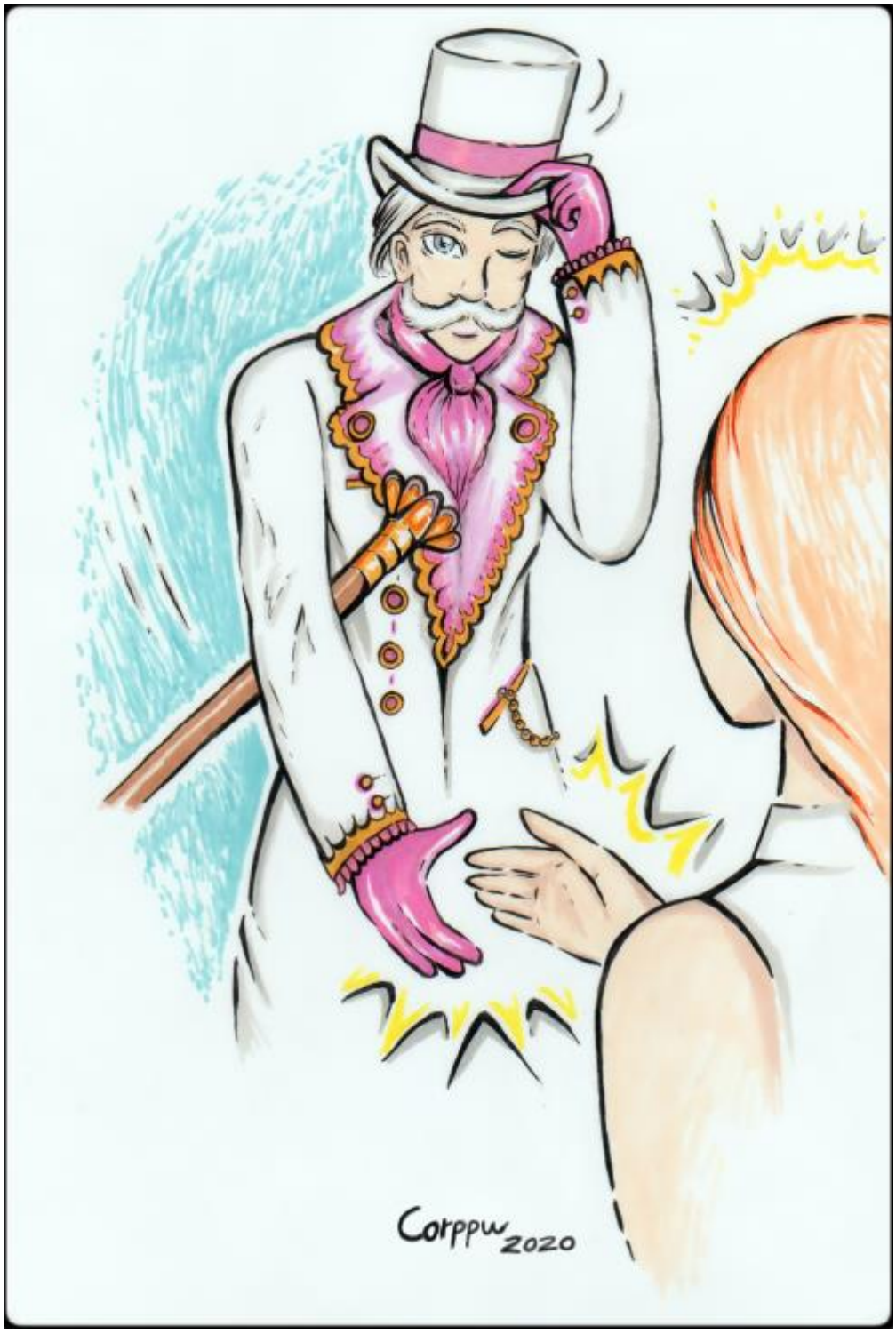
The elder gentleman who kept shaking Miste’s hand gave her the widest of grins from behind his white and fluffy moustache.

“Uh… thank you… good to be aboard, mister…?”

“Koipany is the name, Zylan Koipany, I’m the merry owner of this beautiful vessel.”

The self-proclaimed *merry* owner of the undeniably *beautiful* vessel had an appearance that matched the riverboat’s stylings quite nicely. He wore a luxurious jacket with pink and gold lace details, a frilly tie, and a top hat tipping just a bit to the left. An intricately carved cane with a handle in the shape of a lobster’s tail added further flair to his look. The man was a true dandy.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Koipany, I’m Miste Gauntlett.”



The man laid an appraising look at the metal glove around the girl's arm while continuing with his handshake.

"Gauntlett? How fittingly peculiar! My apologies for being overly forward, but I couldn't keep myself from overhearing your passionate take on my dear vessel a moment ago. It truly

warms my old heart to meet people with such youthful excitement and appreciation for the finer things in life. Is this perhaps your first time on a riverboat?”

“Yeah, it is…”

Mr. Koipany insisted on still shaking Miste’s hand.

“Oh, wonderful! Tell you what, dear Miss Gauntlett, if there is anything I can do to make your journey aboard my vessel the most unforgettable one ever, do not be shy to ask. Come and tug ol’ uncle Koipany by the sleeve and I shall make your wishes into reality!”

“Uhm… thanks… That’s… very hospitable of you…”

The elder gentleman held his pincer firmly around the girl’s hand.

“Not at all, for the heart of a journey is truly about enjoying it to the fullest, wouldn’t you agree, Miss Gauntlett?”

“I do… It would be easier though if I could just have my hand back…”

“Hunh? Ah! My apologies, Miss Gauntlett. This ol’ noggin isn’t all it used to be, it is mostly my heart in control nowadays, and you know what they say about the whims of the heart, it does what it does… ho-ho-ho…”

Mr. Koipany relinquished Miste’s hand and dropped his palm to rest against his cane. An ever-widening grin welcomed Miste once more aboard the riverboat. The girl returned the eccentric elder gentleman’s beaming in kind.

Miste’s friends followed soon after her. Mr. Koipany’s interest got instantly locked on the peculiar group of arrivals.

“Welcome one an’ all! You’re all companions of Miss Gauntlett, if I’m not mistaken? It naturally goes without saying that my hospitality extends to each of you as well, do not be afraid to ask for anything.”

Zeriah received a quick and firm handshake from Mr. Koipany, after which the man proceeded to give Zeriah’s chocolate-brown vest assessing tugs and rubs.

“Uh…?”

“Superb fit… and a marvelously elegant cut… worsted, right?”

“…Yeah, that’s right.”

“I could tell anywhere! You have an excellent tailor, I can just feel their passion. We should trade contacts sometime!”

“Thanks, I bet my mom would appreciate the praise.”

“Oh! I don’t presume she works in fashion, perhaps?”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Ah, nothing much to be done then. I should have known, unique pieces like these simply ooze one’s unparalleled knowledge of their clients’ needs. Well met, my boy.”

Mr. Koipany moved on with a friendly pat on Zeriah’s shoulder.

Dani had his hand already thrust forth for a greeting. As the elder gentleman and the boy shook hands, Dani’s gaze fixated on the lobster tail decoration on the man’s cane.

“That’s one stylish stick!”

“This old thing? Ho-ho, my, thank you.”

“It’s real cool, just looking at it gives me the munchies.”

“I understand fully. There truly is nothing better than a freshly picked fruit of the seas, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Totally!”

“Well, let me assure you, young gourmet, my vessel serves nothing but the finest of dishes, look forward to it.”

As Mr. Koipany moved on to Ejrica, the man’s demeanor shifted towards a more reserved one. He forewent the prospect for a handshake and instead took a slow and deep bow, or at least the deepest one he could muster before his elderly bones forced him to stop.

“A true treasure, a feast to one’s eyes, desert flowers grace those of us bound by the waters so rarely with their beauty. I only hope to be the most satisfactory of hosts towards those who have sworn fealty to strength itself.”

Ejrica looked at the elder gentleman with subtle surprise. As someone upholding Serestrian customs, the woman refrained from physical contact with anyone else but her closest friends. A handshake was a gesture largely unknown in Serestria, a fact that Mr. Koipany showcased uncanny knowledge and respect towards.

Ejrica bowed deep, returning the gesture of the true gentleman in full. After lifting her head, she extended her hand to Mr. Koipany.

“On behalf of my people, I thank you for your respect. It is only fitting that I return such respect in kind.”

The man took the hand offered to him in a soft grip.

“It is truly an honor.”

Mr. Koipany kept his gesture decidedly short, receiving an approving nod from Ejrica in return.

The yet ungreeted member of the group, Reiram, sneaked up on the deck and made his way discreetly for the opposite direction. A delighted shout from Mr. Koipany nailed the elder Adventurer in place.

“Reiram!? Is that really you!? How have you been?”

Reiram turned to meet the gentleman while sighing soundlessly.

“Hello, Zylan…”

In a sudden burst of liveliness, Mr. Koipany rushed for Reiram and snatched him inside a tight embrace.

“Ho-ho-ho, it has been far too long, old mate! What’s with the sneaking, were you surprised to see me?”

“I was holding hope you wouldn’t be here…”

“Ho-ho, still the same kidder as always!”

Mr. Koipany clonked Reiram on the head with his cane. After fixing the angle of his hat, Reiram sighed again.

“And you are as giddy as a child, like always.”

“These bones of mine may decay, but my spirit shall last till the very end, ho-ho!”

The elder gentleman turned to address the rest of the group.

“What a delight beyond description! You youngsters have an excellent taste in friends. Let me tell you, this man here is the truest degree of heroes as they come.”

The youngsters shared amused looks, partly over Mr. Koipany's adorably gleeful smile, and partly over the way Reiram kept tugging his hat to cover his face in embarrassment. Everyone was interested to hear what kind of story the elder gentleman would have to share.

"His heroics? Ah, well, gather around kids and I'll tell you."

"It's really absolutely nothing…"

"Poppycock!"

Another whack from Mr. Koipany's cane dropped on Reiram's head.

"Now then, it all happened when I was but a wee lad. I was climbing aboard this very vessel with my father, and being the fledgling thing that I was, I accidentally ended up tripping on the ramp and falling down for the river, or rather would have, were it not for Reiram rushing in and catching me."

A moment of silence passed as everyone waited for Mr. Koipany to continue his story.

"So, that's pretty much it."

Another instance of silence formed among the group; it wasn't exactly that riveting of a tale of heroics or such.

Reiram rubbed his forehead in annoyance.

"I told you it was nothing. I was merely standing behind Zylan at that time."

"It was truly fate, I say! Just imagine how traumatic it could have been for a child to take such an unwarranted dip; I might have been scarred for life! The simple thought of being unable

to enjoy the life of a mariner that I love so much, oh, it is truly revolting."

Mr. Koipany turned for his old acquaintance and slammed his hand manly over his shoulder.

"Ho-ho-ho, but truly, you never cease to amaze me, Reiram. You look no older than on that day all those decades ago!"

Showcasing expert ability to read the situation, the elder gentleman gave the rest of the group a calming look.

"Oh, no need for alarm, I'm well aware of Reiram's lively and dazzling better half, and about the gift of youth she has graced him with. Tell me, how is dear Freyja nowadays?"

"Lively and dazzling as ever. She says she's happy to see you in high spirits."

"She is such a sweet lady. I *am* in high spirits indeed – reuniting with old friends is such a scarce treat nowadays."

A sly peer at the group slipped from the corner of Mr. Koipany's eye.

"I'm happy you've found companions to travel with, Reiram. Adventurers the whole lot of them, I presume?"

"Yes, at least *soon-to-be* Adventurers."

"Ah, right, this year's trial will be held soon. What glory to be accompanied by the finest in the Guild!"

Reiram responded with an incoherent mutter while averting his gaze.

Miste stepped forth with a soft smile.

"I never guessed Reiram had such easygoing friends. It makes me happy to know he has people who care for him."

Mr. Koipany smiled back at Miste, making his fluffy stache wiggle.

“The feeling is quite the mutual one, Miss Gauntlett.”

The elder gentleman threw a good-humored glare at Reiram.

“Though I cannot believe you haven’t mentioned me to your companions, Reiram… Not even once?”

“Tch, give me a break here…”

Reiram’s shyness made Miste laugh in cottony tone.

“Hihihi! Don’t take it to heart, Mr. Koipany. Reiram rarely mentions anything about anyone…”

* * *

As soon as the riverboat’s staff had finished their preparations ashore, and all the passengers had climbed safely aboard, *The Heart of a Journey* departed the town of Jotel and began its voyage towards the Capital.

Mr. Koipany spent his time before the departure by welcoming each and every one of his passengers aboard his dear vessel. A lot could be said about the elder gentleman’s quirky mannerisms, but none could deny that he was a dedicated and passionate host.

It turned out that the glorious riverboat was far from the only vessel in Zylan Koipany’s possession. In truth, his family had for generations been largely involved in everything having to do with boats, ships, or any other kind of transports, as long as they floated. The Koipany name was known far and wide for providing a variety of services across the entire continent, ranging from boat rentals to ocean crossing voyages aboard the many liners sailing under the man’s payroll.

Midst all of his enterprise, Mr. Koipany held a special attachment to his old-time riverboat. According to him it was the closest thing to a home he'd ever known.

By the coming of evening, the town of Jotel had disappeared far beyond the horizon. The black waters, through which the riverboat sliced forth, and the utter serenity of the vast and empty fields on either side of the river created a relaxing void around the riverboat. An oval moon appeared to light the nightly voyage, along an armada of the brightest of stars.

Compared to the hush of the surrounding world, the atmosphere onboard the riverboat was one of never-ending vibrancy and joy. Throughout the day and far into the night, the passengers bustled and mingled around the luxurious resort above waters – eating, and drinking, and laughing, and enjoying their time to the fullest, while surrounded by constant energy, and music, and fellow people rejoicing and letting loose. Mr. Koipany made sure that the time aboard his dear vessel was a time spent smiling.

…And all of this came at handsomely affordable prices too.

Mr. Koipany insisted that the group of Adventurers *Simply had to!* have dinner with him. By everyone's collective effort, even Reiram eventually yielded and joined the group for a shared meal, though it came with the condition of no more reminiscing of past *heroics* on their host's part.

Continuing with the theme of luxury, the menu at the riverboat's Grand Buffet was truly eye-poppingly, mouth-wateringly, stomach-grumblingly splendorous.

"Holy smokes! Everything looks so good, I don't know where to start…"

“Jeez, Dani, you’re drooling right into the food!”

“A bit of this… some of that, and… Ooh, I gotta try that!”

“Dude! The food ain’t going anywhere, relax! Oh, for the love of… You got the fish and the cakes on the same damn plate!?!”

“Look at it all, Big-Z! There’s just so much to sample, I must have it all! It would be a shame if I filled up before I got to try everything.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you entirely full…”

In the end, Dani was the only one of the party who ended up braving the entirety of the menu, each and every single dish.

“Wooh!! I hereby declare everything here to be tasty beyond belief! Come on guys, you’ve barely nibbled anything, don’t tell me you’re already full.”

“Urgh… just watching you gorge all that food makes me feel a bit ill…”

The dining area was an open space in the middle of a market street that ran through the entirety of the riverboat. Right by the restaurant, a band of musicians stood on stage to fill the promenade with soft and bouncy tunes, dripping with the enchanting feel of summer.

Miste managed to contain herself only briefly, merely swooning and jamming in place, before the music took her over; she bounced up from her seat and took Zeriah by the hand.

“Come on, Zeri, dance with me!”

“Well, alright, just take it easy on me, it’s been a while since last time.”

“Hihi, you’ll do just fine!”

The couple's playful jive ended up gathering the gazes and smiles of many passersby. The way Miste and Zeriah frolicked around one another, with enticing touches and loving looks, made the entire world around them to vanish in an instant, leaving only their pulsing passion and the bounce of the music to fill them.

An adoring sigh whistled from underneath Mr. Koipany's fluffy stache.

"Ah, if only to be young and filled with such passion once more… Does it not simply make your heart soar from delight, Reiram?"

"I honestly couldn't care less…"

The elder Adventurer shifted his eyes towards some unknown point in the distance while sampling his glass of wine.

Dani felt closely same to Mr. Koipany. After everything that had happened during the past week or so, Dani couldn't be happier to see Miste and Zeriah wrapped around each other and beaming their love for all to see. The only crackle in Dani's undeniable bliss was the fact that, for lack of a more discreet way to put it, he felt envious as hell.

I want that too!!!

A couple of sideways nudges with his chair led Dani closer to a certain exotic lady.

"Mystic-M and Big-Z seem to be having fun dancing, huh, Ejrica?"

"They certainly seem to be enjoying their time together, yes."

"So… would *you* care to let loose a bit?"

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh… okay, cool, dancing ain’t for everybody…”

Ejrica got up with pronounced grace.

“Thank you kindly for the meal, Mr. Koipany. Now, if you’ll all excuse me…”

Ejrica gave a snappy bow before striding off. However short their exchange had been, Ejrica had not once turned to look at Dani.

* * *

Summer night, silver moon and a belt of stars, soft breeze ruffling one’s hair, subdued crashing of water, and a riverboat sliding through the dusk and towards a morrow brimming with excitement. It was truly an unbeatable backdrop for a time spent with embraces, a moment to bask in shared passion. Nights like these simply craved for people to indulge their romantic side, refusal to do so would be utter waste, no other way to put it.

Would, should, ought… Regrettably, the fact was that Dani had no person to cuddle up with and call his honey, no matter how badly his heart ached to be free of all inhibitions, to cry out and confess his love for the entire world to hear. The one lady whose presence alone could calm Dani’s restless soul seemed as far from his reach as the stars above.

And so, Dani strolled aimlessly across the highest deck of the riverboat, by himself, while gazing at the twinkles of light that dotted the eternally black canvas that was the night sky. How an endless crowd of stars could leave one feeling so alone…

A triumphant *squawk* resounded high above the deck, drawing Dani's attention for the top of the riverboat's decommissioned chimney. Atop the vessel's highest point, like openly mocking any an' all loners who might be wandering about below, stood a pair of seagulls. The larger of the duo kept flapping its wings and crying out pompously, all the while its companion nuzzled closer. After spending a moment frisking each other's feathers, the couple dropped to soar along the deck, twirling and dancing around one another. The two gulls zoomed right past Dani before gliding towards the horizon.

"Yeah, that's great, I'm so happy for you guys! You go have a nice, gulltastic life together!!"

A choking feeling around Dani's chest forced him to take hold of the boat's guardrail. The boy slumped over the railing and dropped his gaze for the murky waters below.

"Boohoo… so lonely…"

By the side of the riverboat, a pair of carps appeared to swim and hop about playfully, basking in the silver light that shimmered against their white and red scales.

"Are you kidding me!? What's next – a happy couple of fireflies?"

A fluttering spot of light bounced through the air past Dani and settled to sit by the railing. The tiny beetle with a glowing bum tucked its wings and remained in waiting.

"Oh, hi there, Mr. Firefly. Heheh, I guess I ain't the only lonely bachelor on the boat after all."

Just then, another spot of light dropped beside the luminous insect. The two fireflies engaged in a show of merry skittering and affectionate rubbing of each other's antennae.

"*sigh* Maybe I should just throw myself over the edge!"

Dani decided to keep walking and leave the happy bugs to enjoy each other's company in peace.

Not far ahead, yet another couple in the bloom of their love showed itself. Miste and Zeriah were sitting cradled around one another near the bow of the riverboat, gazing at the explosive luminance of silver that hung over the horizon.

Dani turned to head back; he didn't want to disturb the couple's moment. He had barely time to take a single step before Miste's voice called out to him.

"Hi Dani! What's up?"

If only there were other girls – specifically a certain exotic lady – who would notice Dani with such little effort.

The boy did his best to fix his slouching posture and slapped an energetic smile on his face.

"Oh, not much, just on a stroll, y'know, alone, as per normal… hehe."

Miste twirled free from under Zeriah's arm and bounced to meet Dani. She took the boy by the hand and led him to join the couple in their moongazing.

"Well, you're not alone anymore."

"Uh-huh… I should be going though, don't want to butt in…"

As Dani tried to flee, Miste's grip tightened with intimidating zeal. The girl flashed a crafty smile.

“Come on now, we don’t mind the company. Right, Zeri?”

Zeriah’s grin complemented Miste’s gusto perfectly.

“Yeah, come on, Dani, just for a little while.”

The couple’s smirks widened in sync. The collective steel in their gazes nailed Dani in place.

“Alright… It’s not like I have any place to be anyway.”

The trio spent a good while simply admiring the beauty of the night. With such clear skies, the stars showed up like a chain made of white gold, and the moon hung from them like an enormous pearl.

Miste’s voice broke the silence abruptly, making Dani flinch.

“So, will you tell us what’s bothering you, or are you going to make us ask?”

“Huh? Wh–What are you talking about, Mystic-M? Everything is just… fine, excellent, smashing, amazingtastic…”

Zeriah smacked Dani on the back of his head.

“Honestly, I expected more from you. You ain’t fooling anyone with that face. You look like you’ve just stepped on a rake, repeatedly.”

Miste bobbed her head in agreement.

“Not to mention the way you keep sighing all the time.”

“I… I did? I didn’t realize… sorry…”

Miste and Zeriah aimed a unified smile at Dani.

“Now that that’s cleared, out with it already!”

“Yes, tell us!”

Dani was left wriggling in embarrassment. If he was to bring his true feelings out, what that could do to the group was nothing short from catastrophic. Ejrica knew nothing of the depth of feelings Dani held for her, and if Zeriah and Miste were to get wise to the situation and decided to let something slip, things could possibly turn towards awkward in the blink of an eye.

And yet, lying further would lead nowhere.

“Okay guys, you got me. What this is all about is… The gist is that… What I’m thinking is… or rather…”

“Sure, take your time.”

“There’s no rush, hihi…”

Dani took a deep breath to feed his clogged up brain a bit of fresh blood. With the outflow of air, he let his heart spill out.

“The truth is that I really like Ejrica. Like really, really, *really* like her.”

In the ensuing silence, a burst of raspy snickers broke from both Miste and Zeriah.

“Hahaha… Wow, geez Dani, I had *no* idea! A *real* shocker!”

“Hihihi… You’ve kept it really well hidden thus far!”

“Oh, ha-ha! Real nice of you guys. I’m trying to open my heart here. Glad you find it so amusing.”

Miste’s eyes were wet from laughing too hard. She dried her tears and caught Dani inside a comforting hug.

“I’m sorry, Dani. Really, that’s wonderful, I’m glad you could finally say it!”

“Finally…? How long have you guys known?!”

“Dude, you’d either have to be blind or a total idiot not to notice. It’s been clear ever since Powderberg.”

“Come on, be nice, Zeri. What matters here is that now that Dani has decided to be honest, he can–”

Dani bounced backwards from Miste’s embrace.

“Wow! I’ll stop you right there, Mystic-M. If you’re suggesting that I go and tell Ejrica, then no way, not gonna happen.”

“Huh?! Why not?”

The simple thought of it made Dani shake his head.

“I can’t… I mean… just look at me. Do you think someone like Ejrica could honestly be interested in someone like me? And if she doesn’t feel the same way, or worse, comes to resent me, then what does that mean for our group? I don’t want things to get awkward, I’m having too much fun with all you guys, I won’t risk it. I want us to go on plenty more adventures together, all of us…”

Miste clasped Dani’s right hand inside both her palms.

“Listen, it won’t come to that, I know it won’t. We’ll be friends forever, no matter what!”

The blue and purple in Miste’s eyes swirled with gleeful encouragement.

“And as for looking at you – I can’t imagine a girl who wouldn’t be flattered by a love confession from someone sweet and strong like you, Dani.”

“Mystic-M… I… thanks…”

Zeriah gave his brow a playful rub.

“Think of it like this: if a complete dolt like me can swoon a swanky dudette like Miste, then there’s no reason why a cool hotshot Adventurer like you wouldn’t have a chance at a girl.”

“Thanks, you guys… I still don’t know though… I’ve tried talking to Ejrica and getting close to her, but she keeps brushing me aside…”

As Dani fell silent and his gaze drooped to the deck, Miste squatted lower to fish for the boy’s eyes.

“Did something happen between you two?”

Dani lifted himself to stand straight while rubbing his neck in embarrassment.

“Yeah… kinda… it was before we arrived to Jotel, we…”

Dani slapped himself mentally. He’d promised to Ejrica that he would not tell anyone about how the two of them had fallen inside the lemmingshroo nest, or about the exotic lady’s crippling claustrophobia.

“Uhm… let’s just say that we… had *a moment*. Nothing romantic or the like, but in that moment I felt really close to Ejrica, and I think she felt it too. Guess I thought wrong. Ever since then, it’s like she’s become even more abrasive, like she wants nothing to do with me.”

“Well, have you considered the possibility that she actually knows how you feel?”

“What?! Then why would she…”

“Miste is right! Give Ejrica some credit here. I don’t believe Serestrians differ so much from us as to not realize obvious things like that. Maybe she’s the same as you and simply doesn’t know how to bring it up.”

“Then… I should just go and talk things through?”

“Yeah, that could be a good way to go about it.”

Zeriah wrapped his hands around Miste’s shoulders from behind her.

“I for one should have come clean with my own feelings a lot sooner. It gains you nothing to waste time.”

“Hihihi… I’m only glad that you eventually did tell me.”

Miste gave Zeriah a kiss over her shoulder.

The encouragement from his friends, and the promise of possible bliss of romance waiting for him to simply grab it, made Dani feel pumped to do his best.

“Alright! I’ll do it! I’ll talk to Ejrica and tell her how I feel!”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Good luck.”

“Yes! Thanks guys! I won’t let you down!”

With newfound confidence in his heart, Dani dashed off to find the girl of his dreams.

* * *

The cool night breeze kept tugging at a single strand of hair to tickle Ejrica’s cheek. The exotic lady tucked the lock behind her ear.

A passionate lungful of the slightly humid air filled Ejrica with relaxing sensation. Compared to the intense scorch that enveloped her homeland of Serestria all year round, the summers of Zirinia were calmingly gentle.

The beautifully polished ebony that covered the entirety of the riverboat's deck felt slick under Ejrica's bare feet as she paced about the vessel, simply strolling around, while basking in the gentle white light that the nighttime of this land graced its people with.

If only she was free to enjoy it to the fullest.

A constant distraction that broke Ejrica's otherwise perfect – and admittedly welcome – time of relaxation was the feeling of heavy right beneath her chest. It was like a bar of iron had been placed to rest atop her heart, leaving it to pummel erratically and fight for survival under the crushing weight. Confusing and alarming, this heaviness was not all bad, for it left Ejrica's essence in a constant state of warmth pulsing inside her. She… she was happy? This warmth was unlike anything she'd felt before; it bubbled with the sense of longing, choking, being bound, it screamed to be let out.

This perplexing sensation was something Ejrica had carried with her ever since joining her new friends in Powderberg.

Irritating to no end, this mixture of feelings – that by all logic shouldn't come hand in hand – caused her thoughts to become unfocused, dulling out the sharp edge she'd honed throughout her life. And what was even worse about this mixed sensation of heaviness and warmth: it kept growing stronger whenever Ejrica was close to Dani.

A wide-open door leading to the market street inside the riverboat flooded the third deck of the vessel with golden light. A faint note of cheerful music could be heard from within the crowded promenade.

–Are you sure about that dancing thing, Ejrica?

You know I don't dance, Sakuya… And besides, Dani isn't even here…

–Teehee… who said anything about Dani?

Ejrica was absolutely not going to indulge Sakuya in her attempts to tease her. This particular *song and dance* (at least that's how Ejrica remembered the idiom) had become dull. The tiny astra would take all the pleasure she could get out of Ejrica's emotions running amok. Ejrica's jumbled heartbeat was like a drug to the mischievous creature.

I have more pressing matters to think about anyway.

–Like coming up with new excuses? Fighting down your heart when it goes all boingity-boing? How long are you going to lie to yourself?

I am doing no such thing! I know perfectly well how I feel. A healthy distance from all distractions is simply the only way that I'll ever become what I am meant to be.

–Yeah… I guess… But all work and no play will drive anyone insane, y'know.

The 'anyone' in this case being you, Sakuya?

–Naturally! The way your essence swirls whenever you're close to Dani is simply delicious! Ah… I could just bathe in it forever.

Being creatures comprised of no tangible matter, the astra, and their ways, were largely a mystery to mortal folk. It was nigh impossible to grasp how the astra sensed emotions – both their own and their Bearers'. After spending most of her life bound to Sakuya, Ejrica had theorized that the essence inside a Bearer was close to a home to the astra; they wanted to keep it tidy and cozy by any means at their disposal.

Do not fret, Sakuya. If it's excitement you want, then I should be able to provide plenty once I become an Adventurer.

–Teehee, yep! Then you and Dani will be working together a lot more… loads more…

I didn't exactly mean it like that…

The golden radiance from the promenade and the silver beams of light from the night sky crossed paths by the riverboat's railing. The collected light danced and bounced from tiny particles of crystal, giving the air around a certain peculiar lady a truly ethereal feel. Freyja's projection stood gazing at the moon, with Reiram leaning against the railing right beside her.

It wasn't strange at all to see the elder Adventurer by himself, but the way his partner astra simply stood there, out in the open and drawing attention, was something quite out of the ordinary indeed.

Ejrica peered around for any prying eyes – none to be seen – before steering her course for the man and the astra.

"Hello, Reiram, Freyja."

The elder Adventurer responded with a slight nod and an upbeat grunt. The ethereal lady with him twirled her way into the open, making her projection explode into a brilliant rainbow of colors, a fireworks show in the form of a woman.

"Why hello, Ejrica! How fun that you've come to enjoy the night with us."

"What are you two up to?"

"Oh, simply unwinding a bit. You see…"

"I needed at least a moment's rest from Zylan!"

“Yes, that. And it’s such a lovely view here, so why not relish it?”

Ejrica peered for the direction of the promenade with concern.

“But aren’t you worried that someone might see if Freyja stays in the open like this?”

Reiram snorted dismissively at Ejrica’s worry.

“I wouldn’t bother. Most folk who are still up this late are bound to be a bit tipsy, if not from the wine, then from each other’s company, if you read me, so there’s little worry. Tonight, Freyja here isn’t but another hallucination.”

“A radiant, lovely, delectably alluring hallucination, right?”

The lady astra fluttered closer to her partner and wrapped him within her joyful glimmering.

“Yeah… sure, whatever.”

“Boo, that’s not right! One more time, repeat after me: *Why yes, you do look absolutely ravishing, dear Freyja*. Okay, now you try.”

“Buzz off, you spectral harpy!”

Reiram shooed the astra away by swatting at the air.

“Fine, be like that, hmpf!”

The lady astra made a majorly unladylike face at Reiram before turning away with a pout.

Sakuya’s projection unraveled suddenly into view from behind Ejrica’s shoulder.

“Hey, let me in on this!”

“W–Wait, what are you doing?! Someone will see!”

The tiny astra settled to sit on the railing next to Reiram.

“Stop being such a worrywart, Ejrica! Rei-Rei says it’s okay, so relax.”

“I swear… if that *Rei-Rei* -thing spreads any further, I’m going to murder Dani…”

“Teehee, Rei-Rei is being scary!”

Ejrica couldn’t help but crack a snicker, seeing how quickly Sakuya was able to find the exact buttons to push on any given person.

“Fine, Sakuya, you can stay, but just try to be at least a tad inconspicuous.”

“I honestly can’t see the point of you Bearers always fuzzing over not being found out. I for one would love some more attention.”

Sakuya kept swaying from side to side while sitting on the railing – if she were truly a little girl, and not an astral projection, this would be the point where any responsible guardian would tell her to get down this instant, lest they fall over the edge.

“I bet you would, Sakuya.”

Reiram turned to peer at the tiny astra.

“In many respects, information is power. By keeping our abilities concealed, we minimize the risk of unwanted attention, the *real* unwanted attention. I’m sure you can understand this. It is not only because we despise the limelight, though that is admittedly a part of it, but it’s for our own protection.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know! It’s just that by keeping quiet, many people nowadays are dumb-dumbs who don’t even know that we astra truly exist. Ignorant masses; denounce my existence, will you!? I’ll show them all!!!”

Ejrica waved for Sakuya to keep it down.

“*sigh* It is truly a tragedy that more people don’t get to enjoy your captivating company.”

“Do you honestly mean that, or are you just being clever?”

“Let’s say half and half.”

“Bah, I’ll take what I can get.”

Sakuya zoomed from her seat to twirl around Ejrica and wrapped the woman within her flowing garb. The tiny astra’s frolicking ended with her sitting on Ejrica’s shoulder.

“Teehee, I don’t actually care for anyone else’s attention but yours, Ejrica.”

“I know, Sakuya, don’t worry, I know full well.”

Sakuya’s focus shifted for the lady astra who was still pouting.

“Hey, auntie Freyja!”

Freyja cringed visibly.

“Again with the *auntie* stuff… We’re both quite old.”

“Oh, but you’re quite different, you lady are practically ancient, I can tell.”

Freyja’s face flared with fury. The lady did her best to force out a gentle smile, ending up with something rather scary.

“Was there something you needed…?”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask you something. Have you ever considered that maybe the reason you always get brushed aside by Rei-Rei is that he simply has different preferences? Like, maybe he likes things that are tiny and cute over ancient harpies?”

The barely held up smile on Freyja erupted into volcanic glare of pure murderous intent.

“Why you wretched sapling…!!”

Sakuya zoomed farther down the deck while giggling away. Freyja gave chase, swatting at the tiny and cute astra with fury. Seeing the two astra playing around was rather weird; neither of them could touch each other, so the whole thing was largely pointless, like two gusts of wind playing tag.

Reiram sighed against his palm while giving his temple an annoyed rub.

“Just for the record, I don’t have any preferences. Not for cute or whatever… nor for ancient harpies and the like…”

Sakuya and Freyja kept zooming from one end of the deck to the other. Ejrica settled to lean on the railing next to Reiram. The two watched together as their respective astral partners raved about.

“Sorry about this, Reiram. Sakuya can be a bit wild sometimes.”

“Oh, it’s nothing! What’s a moment of peace and quiet without a couple of imbeciles causing a ruckus?”

Reiram threw a goodwilled smirk Ejrica’s way before turning to gaze at the moon.

Silence settled between the pair of Astral Bearers – well, as much of a silence as their partners allowed with their noisy game of tag.

Ejrica tried following Reiram's example in simply taking in the night with all of its soothing beauty. In the end, no amount of moongazing could entirely lift the squeeze within Ejrica's chest. Even though she had a clear path to follow, and even though she was surrounded by friends who cared for her, she could not escape the sense of something being amiss, manifested by her heart drumming wild and her thought's drifting to impossible places.

"You seem to be well-versed in handling distractions, Reiram."

"After long enough of wandering about, you're bound to get used to the commotion."

"Even within yourself?"

Reiram glanced at Ejrica, somewhat surprised. His gaze drifted to the pair of astra still in the midst of chasing each other, then quickly returned back to Ejrica. A soundless sigh slithered between Reiram's teeth as he turned to face Ejrica properly.

"When you say *within yourself*, you aren't talking about Sakuya, right?"

"I… uh…"

"Tch, what a bother…"

"Ah! I'm sorry, forget I asked."

As Ejrica turned away from Reiram, she found Sakuya dashing right for her. The astra drew a loop around her partner and settled to sit on her shoulder.

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing, Sakuya.”

“Ooh, you’re talking about Dani, aren’t you?”

“A–Absolutely not!”

Sakuya rubbed her cheek affectionately against Ejrica’s.

“Teehee, you can’t hide it from me! Whenever your thoughts so much as graze him, your essence starts swooning so beautifully, it always draws me in.”

Freyja arrived soon in Sakuya’s wake.

“Hey! Don’t just ignore me all of a sudden!”

“That was fun, let’s do that again sometime, auntie Freyja.”

“What?! No way!!”

Reiram motioned for his partner to calm down.

“Now, now, the little bundle of energy simply wants someone to play with, be a good auntie and indulge her a little bit, Freyja.”

“Why do you have to call me *auntie* too… *sob*”

“For crying out loud… Show some dignity. And… if I’m perfectly honest, there is a certain allure to a lady who takes care of the little ones.”

“R–Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“Yes, I mean it.”

Freyja threw herself against her Bearer to snuggle his chest.

“Oh, Reiram!”

The lady astra beamed a triumphant look at Sakuya.

“There, see?! Reiram is a man of impeccable taste.”

The little one retorted with a giggly smile.

“I never really doubted it. I mean, he clearly isn’t like this meat-for-brains over here.”

Though Sakuya couldn’t exactly poke her, Ejrica felt an irritating nudge in her brain as the astra pointed at her.

“Would you just give it a rest already?”

Freyja’s radiance enveloped the group as she fluttered between Ejrica and Reiram.

“You and Dani make an adorable couple.”

“Wha–!? Where did that come from!? We aren’t…”

“Oops, I meant you two *would* make an adorable couple.”

“That doesn’t change anything!”

“Are you saying that all those soft looks and the warmth between you two mean nothing?”

“I don’t… but… I… ah…”

Reiram saved Ejrica from her fit of stuttering.

“Leave the poor girl to be, Freyja. You’re not helping.”

The lady astra retreated with heavy reluctance.

“I’m sorry, it is not my place to speak.”

The squeezing heaviness within Ejrica grew in volume along the beating of her heart. The constant hammering inside lifted a rush of warmth to wash over her face. She had to chomp down hard on her lip to stop them from quivering.

Am I truly that easy to read?

Reiram fixed the angle of his hat while giving his hair an irritated rustle.

“Listen, Ejrica. No matter how much you try to fight it, there will be times when life pulls you in a million directions at once. A mere lifetime isn’t enough to answer each and every call, so it’s much simpler to let yourself go and just follow the strongest one. Whatever you decide to do regarding Dani, it is best that you do it as soon as possible.”

Freyja hummed in support to Reiram’s words.

“I know it sounds funny coming from us, but it is true, life is short. Don’t waste time worrying too much and just try to enjoy yourself.”

The man and the lady astra both laid an encouraging look on Ejrica.

A nodding bow from Ejrica vouched her gratitude.

“Yes, you’re right, thank you. I feel ashamed for disturbing you with my uneasiness. Sorry.”

“Tch, nothing to it. I suppose it’s only right we senior Adventurers help the fledglings with their woes.”

“We’ll be there anytime you need us, Ejrica.”

“Well… not *anytime*, I’m not exactly planning on going fulltime counselor…”

“Reiram, honestly, we’re having a beautiful moment here, don’t ruin it.”

“Thank you both, truly.”

Reiram grunted somewhat indifferently. His attention shifted for the doorway leading to the promenade.

“It looks like my breaktime is over…”

Mr. Koipany was wobbling towards the group with a hefty bottle of spirits under his arm. The only thing keeping the elder gentleman from tipping over was his trusty cane.

“Ho-ho-ho, there you are, Reiram! I’ve been looking at you all over… no, wait… looking *for* you all over, yes, that’s it. I got this incredible vintage brandy, how ‘bout we get to my cabin and crank this beauty open…?”

“I think you’ve had quite enough for the evening, Zylan.”

“And I say that I haven’t had enough… with you that is… booze… Let us go!”

“Fine, fine, I’ll see you to your quarters.”

“Oh! I just had the most smashing of ideas! You should stay the night in my cabin. We can reminisce the ol’ times and drink till we drop…”

“Hell no! Now, say good night to the nice people, Zylan.”

“Alright… good night Lady Freyja, good night Miss Nekaro, good night… funny-looking girl on Miss Nekaro’s shoulder…? Huh… I guess I should ease a bit on the liquor…”

Freyja threw a warm handwave at Ejrica before her projection dissipated into a puff of crystalline dust. Reiram, along his spirited – in more ways than one – acquaintance limped slowly for the door and disappeared into the depths of the boat.

The soft sound of music flooded the deck from the promenade, filling the void of silence.

Suddenly, Sakuya’s giggle boomed out giddy as ever.

“Teehee, so, what’s it going to be, Ejrica?”

“Huh? I can’t be expected to just suddenly sort out things! Give me time. It’s not like there’s any rush.”

“Oh, I say you better start thinking fast. Good luck, I’ll leave you guys to it.

Sakuya dissolved her projection.

“Hey, wait, what do you mean you’ll *leave us*? Who?”

The mischievous astra’s voice tickled Ejrica right next to her heart.

–Don’t even think about running from this, otherwise I’m forced to take drastic measures.

What are you talking about?! You aren’t making any sense…

Just then, Ejrica noticed Dani arriving from the promenade.

* * *

Dani had to stop for a second to fully soak in the exotic beauty’s allure. With the moon looming behind her to bathe her in pure-white light, Ejrica’s soft curves, strong form, deep eyes, and skin akin to a dark delectable treat, all of her appeared as the rarest of flowers, one that blossomed to reveal its graces only by night. A truly imposing challenge for any bachelor captivated by her elegance, for sure. However, Dani wasn’t about to back down. The only way for his feelings to come out genuine was for him to be honest, come what may.

“Hi Ejrica! Good thing I found you.”

“Is that so? Did you need something from me?”

“I have something to talk to you about.”

“You have? That’s funny, I also have something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Dani walked right beside Ejrica, joining her to bathe in the moonlight.

“Can I go first? It’s kinda important.”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“Okay, here goes…”

Even though Dani’s feelings were clear as could be, sharing them with the person of his allure wasn’t anything close to simple.

“I’ve done a lot of thinking, about us, and about what you mean to me…”

Ejrica flinched slightly. The dark ink in her eyes froze into two round plates.

“…These past weeks have been some of the greatest I’ve ever lived, and a huge part of that is you being there. I can’t fully explain how happy I am that you decided to come with us to the Capital. It feels like every day is my birthday, cos I know I’ll be able to see you.”

“Dani…”

“You’re the kindest, strongest, sweetest, coolest, bravest, awesomest, most beautiful girl I’ve ever met, the whole package.”

Dani looked Ejrica deep into her eyes, drilling against the frozen ink within. The boy poured out the entirety of his soul’s warmth through his gaze.

“I can’t keep it within me any longer. Ejrica… I… I lo–”

“Don’t say it Dani!!”

Both of Ejrica's palms slammed to cover Dani's mouth. She dropped into a deep bow, her hands quivering against Dani's face.

"Please, don't say it… I beg of you…"

The terror oozing from Ejrica was reminiscent of the way Dani had seen her when the two were trapped inside the lemmingshroo nest. Her extreme reaction to Dani's confession made the boy squirm and curse himself – had he already messed everything up this royally?

Dani managed to hum out an affirmative grunt through Ejrica's hands. The lady released her grip and took a step away from the boy, cradling herself in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, Dani…"

Dani dared not say anything further.

"I'm honored you feel that way about me, but I think that right now… my heart simply couldn't take you saying it out loud."

Ejrica bit her lip fiercely, her gaze drifting into the distance. A trickle of blood dripping on her chin snapped her out of her daze.

"The truth is that I… I… hold similar feelings for you."

One for the history books: those words from Ejrica made Dani's heart jump the happiest it ever had.

"I've never felt this kind of bond with anyone. You're the most earnest man I have ever met, your smile is always genuine, and I adore the energy you bring to those around you…"

Ejrica grasped her tunic by her chest as a tiny wince of pain flashed on her face.

“You saw me at my lowest, and you saved me… I’m eternally grateful for that. But since then… with you, I feel naked, vulnerable… I have no room for those kinds of feelings if I am to achieve my goal. Can you understand?”

“I… think I get it.”

“I truly am sorry, I hope you don’t hate me for this.”

“Are you stupid?! I could never hate you!”

Dani knew Ejrica would never lie to him, she was speaking from the heart, and as such, there was really nothing further Dani could say or do to bend things to his favor. Still, this was far better than outright rejection, loads better.

An awkward silence surrounded the pair. Ejrica was still clearly flustered.

Dani leaned against the deck’s railing.

“So, you’ll become an Adventurer and continue to train yourself to become the strongest martial artist you can be, is that right?”

“Yes, until I am what I am meant to be, I cannot allow myself any distractions.”

“Alrighty then, that just means I’m going to support you all the way till you reach the top!”

Ejrica’s face lightened slightly with surprise. Dani slid himself closer to her while putting on a crafty grin.

“Just promise me one thing, will you? Once you’ve overcome all obstacles, reached the place you wanna be, become the best, when there’s nothing more for you to do and you feel like unwinding – let me be the first one to know.”

A luminous smile exploded on Ejrica's face. The softest of laughs broke from her lips as she nodded with joy.

"You bet!"

In full honesty, the fact that Dani now knew his feelings for Ejrica to be mutual, sweetened only by the sight of the lady in her unabashed glee, was well enough for him. He would remain by Ejrica's side for as long as it would take to show the full extent of his revere and devotion to her.

"I guess it's getting a bit late, we should get some shuteye before tomorrow."

As Dani began heading away, Ejrica clasped him by the sleeve.

"Huh? Is something the matter?"

"No, not at all. I was just wondering if you'd maybe… like to dance with me?"

"What?! …I mean, yeah, sure, of course, totally!"

The melody pouring from the promenade set a fitting mood on the moonlit deck; soft yet bouncy, and filled with earnest energy.

"I should warn you though, I'm not familiar with any Zirinian dances."

"That makes two of us. Never been exactly Mr. Smooth-jive myself…"

"So… uhm… how should we…?"

"I'd like to see you dance the way you feel like."

"The way I feel…?"

At first, Ejrica's steps were sharp, reserved, her gaze sliding along the deck with her feet. Then, little by little, she added bounce to her moves, her arms flowing softly with her stride, like a lily gliding above the waves of a lake. A pronounced jump transitioned the exotic beauty's dance into a heated sequence of twirls, leaps and kicks, her body rocking from side to side, hitting every beat of the music, hips swaying, her head bobbing, her hands running through her locks to throw them for the winds. Her eyes remained nailed at Dani, pulsing with warmth, almost seductive, with the widest of smiles on her face.

Dani had many times thought Ejrica's moves while she'd practice her martial arts as akin to a stunning dance, but now he realized that the deepest essence within this exotic lady, her soul, one bursting out only through unbound motion, was in truth so much more beautiful.

Dani did his best to follow Ejrica's example, ending up with a rather ridiculous shuffle. The exotic beauty laughed in delight, moving closer to Dani, wrapping her hands around his, and brought the two into a frantic twirl across the deck.

The two close-knit friends kept on dancing late into the night, basking in the moonlight and indulging in the warmth and revere they held for each other. Tonight, their unbridled joy would be hard to match in the entirety of the Kingdom of Zirinia – in fact, it might very well have been impossible.


Corppu 2020

VERSE #31: MAGNA CRUX

It was six hundred years ago when the entire northern continent was swept into the bloodiest conflict in recorded history, *The Great Continental War*.

In his attempts to extend his rule, *Emperor Greywix Shepferd* of the western *Empire of Vaios* sent his troops to march across the continent – his ultimate goal being complete dominance over each soul inhabiting the lands.

Back then, the continent consisted of dozens of small nations, none of them great enough to stand a chance in the face of the Empire's might. Many kingdoms fell, some bowing to their fate peacefully, others dyeing their soil with the blood of their men.

Ultimately, the shameless usurping of Vaios was halted by a coalition between the remaining nations to the east. After countless battles, and millions of lives lost, the Empire finally met its match. Emperor Shepferd saw his dreams of world dominance washed away by his own spilled blood.

In the aftermath of the war, Vaios was made to retreat, and the stolen lands were returned under the rule of their rightful people. Furthermore, the example presented by the Empire's dastardly warmongering prompted the fractured nations of east to form a permanent alliance, so that the tragedy of The Great Continental War would never be repeated.

During the negotiations, it was decided that to ensure the greatest security for all their people, the kingdoms of east were to abolish their borders and form a brand new unified realm. The royal families of each of the old kingdoms were to

relinquish their rule and place their support behind the newly elected Crown.

The only person among the candidates who garnered approval from all the former kings and queens was a prominent leader in the war effort against Vaios – *General Cassandra Withound*. Due to her uncanny leadership skills, and the widespread echo of revere her name received throughout the lands, it was decided that the General would rise as the first queen of the newly founded *Kingdom of Zirinia*.

It is told that the name for the Kingdom was proposed by the Queen herself, after the gemstone zircon, a common mineral with a beautiful hue and resilience rivaling that of a diamond. When Queen Withound's own parents had married, her father had given her mother a ring embedded with zircon, for he was a poor man and couldn't afford diamonds. Nonetheless, their union had been one filled with love. They both had taken their last breaths while fleeing their home once the madness of Vaios had swept over the lands.

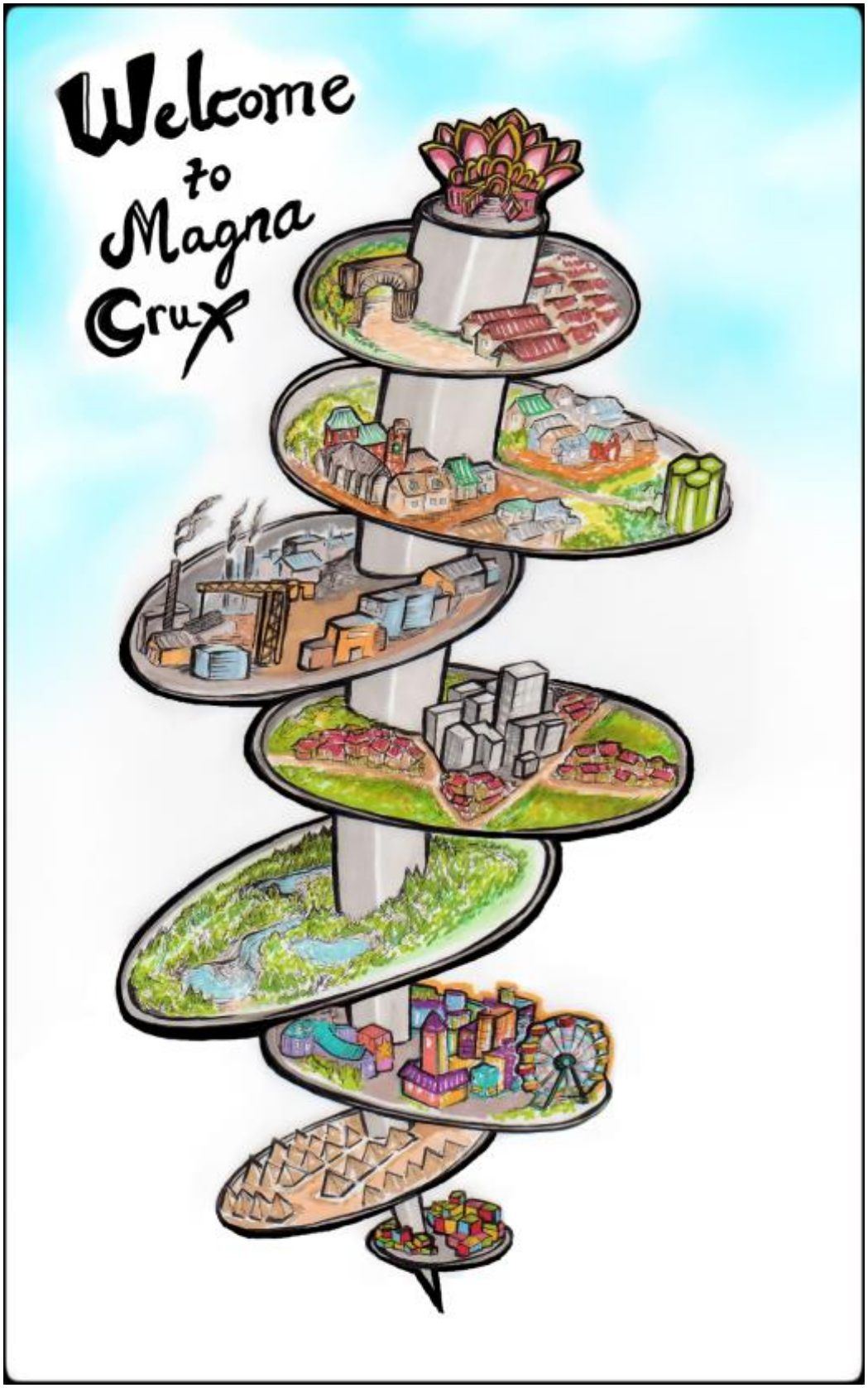
As an everlasting sign of Zirinian unity, the plans for a new Royal Capital were put into motion not long after Queen Withound's coronation. The responsibilities of chief architect were given to a man named *Temprer Vitruvius*. He was the former king to Cassandra Withound, now bowing down to her instead – with unabashed glee one might have added. Set free of his duties as king, Vitruvius was filled with joy as he got the chance to indulge his own passion for architecture. He has been cited announcing that; *Nothing less than absolute perfection shall suffice for my queen*.

The first new city in Zirinian history was to be built at the spot where all the former borders intersected. As it turned out,

Vitruvius's grand vision was unlike anything that had been done before; the mere concept was something out of the daydreams of a raving megalomaniac. But since nothing less than his absolute best would suffice…

* * *

Magna Crux loomed over the land of Zirinia as an impossibly mammoth lance that pierced the heavens; the city was built upon an enormous pillar of steel, reaching the height of three kilometers, with nine massive levels resting on top of metallic plates that extended from the sides of the pillar. The city was surrounded by an endless steppe, full of lush green grass and flowers blooming like blue stars, giving the magnificent Royal Capital a fittingly beautiful framing.



At the root of the pillar, the land had been fortified with a kilometer-wide circular steel pedestal. On top of the metal, there

resided several railway stations for locomotives arriving from all around the Kingdom, and a grand harbor for vessels traveling by the river. The area resembled an over-crowded town, with rows of shops and residences, and busy streets filled with vehicles and people pacing about. The boulevards of this *Station-town* were embedded with colorful mosaic of stone to give the metal base a more inviting feel. The path to the city proper would lead travelers through this area and towards the steel pillar at the center.

Inside the pillar, hundreds of elevators traveled up and down between the many levels of Magna Crux. These levels – dubbed *Sectors* – extended outward from the central structural pillar across enormous plates of steel. Each of these *Sectors* was large enough to be called a metropolis by themselves. Each of them held a dedicated function, as well as a unique look and feel, courtesy of the city's chief architect. *Temprer Vitruvius* was an avid admirer of various cultures all across the continent; he wanted to do honor to their diverse achievements, while at the same time bringing unity to the Royal Capital by celebrating all of the people living under the banner of Zirinia.

The lowest level, *Sector #9*, greeted travelers half a kilometer off the ground. The sector acted as a residential district, with architecture inspired by that of southwestern parts of Zirinia. Buildings consisted of clusters of colorful dice-like components, interlocking in haphazard shapes, giving the sector the feel of a cubist painting come to life.

Sector #8, another residential district, stood a few hundred meters above the former. Its design pooled its inspiration from the eastern and southern coasts of Zirinia, as well as partly from Serestria. The housing was constructed in geometrical clusters;

stacks of apartments climbed and descended in stair-like formations, with tiny flights of steps linking the different levels. Wide market streets ran between these pyramid-esque apartment buildings to add a sense of breeziness and freedom to the area. Limestone acted as the main building material – meanwhile, decorative marble pillars dotted the streets to give the sector a nice balance between robust functionality and tasteful luxury.

Sector #7 served as a city-sized commercial district, filled to the brim with shops, cafes, restaurants, hotels and entertainment of all kinds! Sector #7 was the area that had seen the greatest amount of renovation throughout the ages, influenced by the changing tides of time and the evolving needs of the public. Function and allure trumped all else. Therefore, the area ended up as a cluttered collection of business-oriented high-rises and blocky shopping malls, all plastered with large neon signs – there was no true architectural vision to be found.

As if predicting what Sector #7 would eventually become, Temprer Vitruvius had envisioned *Sector #6* to be its polar opposite. By covering the enormous plate of steel with soil, coupled with diligent work of planting new flora, as well as introducing a variety of creatures to a brand-new habitat, the entire area that hung above ground had been turned into an artificial nature preserve. The area was open to the public all year round. Folks could come and witness the relaxing beauty of nature any time they wished. During certain seasons, activities such as fishing and hunting were also permitted, though naturally limited only to specific species. A great amount of the creatures living in Sector #6 had become endangered since its inception, leaving the area as their last bastion.

Higher still, *Sector #5* acted as yet another residential district. The stylings throughout the sector borrowed heavily from the northern and eastern corners of Zirinia. The vision behind the sector was to combine the allure of two distinct city types; bustling metropolises and tiny village communities. As such, the sector was sharply split in design. At the middle of the sector, enormous skyscrapers rose from the ground. Thousands of windows dotted the walls – in fact, there was more glass than stone in each of the buildings, making it so that when the midday sun beamed from the cloudless sky the entire area would explode with radiance like a newborn star. Surrounding this bright pillar jungle, several suburban towns were built to frame it. In each of these towns, rural sensibilities took over; snaking roads, rugged stone paving, tiny houses, earthly materials, wood, thatch and brick. Separating each of the suburban areas, there was a blossoming meadow, where the grass swayed like oceans of green and the flowers formed endless rainbows.

S*ector #4*, the industrial district, held the bulk of factories and printing stations that resided in the Capital. It was a place of endless crunch and clatter, smoke and smear, shifting of gears and smelting of metal. A large area at the edge of the sector was dedicated to simple and affordable apartments for the working force. Alongside the basic elevators used for public transport, a set of specialized heavy-duty elevators were used exclusively to carry materials and machinery in and out of the sector.

Nearing the top of the pillar, *Sector #3* took its inspiration from the oldest and grandest cities of Zirinia. *Bosower*, *Verdix*, *Mahclan* – the cradles of art and education. Chains of high-rise buildings framed the streets throughout the sector, broken up by luscious gardens and market plazas. The buildings were

decorated with sculptures and ornate carvings across the walls, windowsills and rooftops – while the rest of the sector was beautified with magnificent arches, opulent pillars, and hollow vaults, artistic nooks and crannies of all kinds. With its vibrancy and elevated splendor, the accommodation in Sector #3 was on the pricier side. Consequently, it was largely inhabited by those well-off in life. Notably, the sector also held the premises of *Hex Nova*, the revered *Guild of Adventurers*.

The last sector before the very top, shrouded by a curtain of clouds, *Sector #2*, acted as the headquarters for Zirinia's protectors, *The Knights of Minerva*. The area was significantly more compact than other sectors, and purely functional in design. Most of it consisted of armories, training facilities, offices, and simple accommodation for the knights. The area was accessible only via specific military elevators, which were strictly off-limits for normal folk; the elevators demanded specialized access codes unique to each knight. Sector #2, and The Order of Knights, acted as the last line of defense before the summit of Magna Crux.

At the highest point of the Royal Capital, like an enormous crown watching over the entire realm and all its citizens, was the royal palace. *Sector #1* – which was decidedly never actually called such – consisted exclusively of the glamorous halls of ruling, home to the great majesty and their family. The grand architect, *Temprer Vitruvius,* had poured all of his passion for design, his eye for beauty, and his adoration towards his new queen into his magnum opus in architecture: imposing might, fused with softness in shapes; countless pillars; intricate detail in décor; coated in marble, gold and platinum; and towers that sliced towards the highest heavens like massive flower petals. Further still, hiding deep within the embrace of the palace,

there was a lustrous garden of legendary status. It was said that its beauty and tranquility would entrap any soul, leaving them with the desire to never depart again – A true slice of heaven.

Throughout the eons, Magna Crux had stood as a radiant symbol of Zirinian unity, and as an example for the generations to come that greatness could always blossom from the ashes of a grave tragedy. It reminded people to never give up, and to always move towards betterment for all!

* * *

By the time that *The Heart of a Journey* anchored down at the harbor by the root of Magna Crux, Miste had already had her gaze glued on the Royal Capital for a better part of an hour. She kept bouncing up and down the deck of the riverboat like a kid on sugar rush.

“Whoooooow… Holy apple pie!! Holy apple pie with whipped cream and caramel sauce on top!! It’s even more ginormous than I ever imagined!!!”

It was hard for Miste to contain her excitement and not simply jump off the riverboat and use Yggdrazil’s power to flutter the rest of the way to the harbor. In the end, Zeriah’s arm wrapping around her proved to be an effective anchor.

“This is it!! I can’t tell how many times I’ve imagined this very moment! My dream of becoming an Adventurer is so close to coming true… I feel all tingly… Gaah, I can’t wait!! My heart is about to explode!!”

“Just try to hold yourself together a tad longer. I don’t think Hex Nova has any use for you if you show up in bits and pieces.”

“I’ll try… but I make no promises!”

Just like when departing from Jotel, the merry owner of the riverboat was there to give his greetings to each of his valued passengers stepping ashore in Magna Crux. The group of Adventurers waited until the masses of people had passed by, so that they could thank Mr. Koipany properly for all his hospitality.

“Ho-ho-ho, waiting till the very last moment before leaving, are we? I can’t blame you; my beautiful vessel is certainly alluring.”

“Thank you for everything, Mr. Koipany. It has been an awesome journey. I can’t imagine a more relaxing way to travel.”

“My, Miss Gauntlett, I don’t reckon there is a higher praise that an old mariner like myself could hope for. Thank you kindly, the pleasure has been mine.”

The elder gentleman’s white moustache twitched as he gave the entire group a wide smile.

“Best of luck with the trial! Do take care, for the life of an Adventurer is one filled with adversities. Although, I’m sure you’re all aware of that already, seeing as you’re traveling with Reiram here.”

“Tch, as if *I’m* the one always dragging us to all sorts of trouble…”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Koipany, we promise to take good care of your friend.”

“Reiram is a valued senior Adventurer after all.”

“Yep, Rei-Rei is in good hands!”

“Brothers and sisters in arms ought to stand together.”

“Is everyone here deaf or something!? *I am not the one who requires a babysitter here*!!”

The quartet of youngsters snickered amongst themselves. Getting Reiram riled up was almost too easy.

Mr. Koipany joined in the laughter.

“Ho-ho, such energy! Be sure to take care of the younglings as well, Reiram. Who knows, maybe some of their smile will eventually rub off on you too.”

“I strongly doubt it, Zylan.”

“*Doubt*? So it’s not an absolute *no*?”

“We should probably be on our way…”

As the group planted their feet on dry land, the elder gentleman of the riverboat reached out to them one last time from up on the deck.

“Oh, one more thing! When it comes to traveling the waters of this land, my reach is without compare. So, if you ever need a vessel, or any such assistance, you should speak to my people, you’ll find them from pretty much any port. I’ll be sure to let everyone know that you’re my friends, so they’ll help you with anything you may need.”

Mr. Koipany punctuated his abundant goodwill with a sly wink.

“Farewell my friends! I look forward to hearing great things about you soon!”

* * *

The circular railway-station-harbor-area at the base of Magna Crux consisted of numerous perfectly straight streets, all leading towards the towering steel structure at the middle. The

multicolored mosaic that covered the boulevards, with a glimmer of metal shining between the seams, created an illusion of walking across a sea of jewels. Despite the artistry below one's feet, the swarms of people that filled every inch of it made it rather hard to appreciate. Juxtaposed with the crowded streets of towns such as Powderberg or Baltric, even at their most busy hours, the Station-town at the base of the Royal Capital made them feel vacant by comparison. Miste and her friends had to slowly nudge forward along the crowd, rubbing shoulder to shoulder and back to back.

"I've never seen people packed this tight, is it always like this?"

"On early afternoons like this? Pretty much, yeah. Don't worry, Mystic-M, it gets a lot breezier once we get up to the city proper."

Standing at the root of Magna Crux – the great lance that pierced the heavens – while gazing up towards the higher levels, and being greeted with nothing but masses upon masses of steel blocking the sky, made Miste feel utterly humbled. How could such an imposing structure be built in the first place? Thinking of the logistics alone made Miste's head spin in awe. Considering the state of technological advancement – or the lack thereof – six hundred years ago, the thought of building something as grand as the Royal Capital felt impossible. And yet there it was!

An amusing thought hit Miste as she recalled all the challenges she herself had faced while working on her gauntlet; she'd been forced to scrape together miscellaneous parts and components and simply make it work with what she had. In the end, her thrown-together invention had steered her life towards a wonderous direction, or rather the direction truly meant for her.

Miste gazed at the gauntlet around her right arm, and the blue alaxdrite decorating the back of her hand.

This is it, Yggdrazil! I'll show you what I'm truly made of. You can be proud of your Bearer, I swear it!

A tiny flicker within the blue gem responded to Miste. She felt Yggdrazil's presence softly brushing against her heart.

Several arching doorways led inside the steel pillar. Dozens of station officers clad in modest grey uniforms guided the arriving masses to wait in lines for the elevators.

The elevator cabins were flat ovals in shape, with a door that slid upward to open the way in – the apparatus kinda looked like an enormous eye made of metal. Four rows of seats were placed within, carrying twenty people at once. The station personnel made sure that each cabin was fully loaded before they'd send the elevator on its way towards the upper levels.

Once it came Miste and the other's turn to enter the elevator, she noticed how Ejrica suddenly started lagging behind the rest of the group. She seemed anxious, eyeing at the elevator while biting her lip. Before Miste could ask what was wrong, Dani zoomed back out of the elevator and took Ejrica by her hand. With a confident smile etched on his face, the boy whispered something to the exotic lady. Ejrica returned Dani's smile with a nod. The two joined the group and sat side by side inside the elevator, still holding hands.

Miste was able to read Dani's lips – it looked like he had said; *It's going to be okay*.

Miste couldn't be sure what the exchange was all about, but she was happy to see Dani and Ejrica getting along. The air of warmth around the duo, one that had been there from the start,

seemed to have grown stronger during the riverboat trip from Jotel to Magna Crux.

Apparently, Dani's love confession for Ejrica hadn't exactly gone the way he'd envisioned, but it had brought forth something good all the same, that much was evident. Miste had refrained from grilling either Dani or Ejrica too much on the matter, but what she had been able to gather from both of them was that she *shouldn't worry* and that *everything was as it should be*.

Frankly, seeing the couple leaning for one another, with Ejrica coiling her hand tighter around Dani as the elevator set off, was heartwarming. Dani and Ejrica were some of the most awesome people Miste knew, and both of them deserved a person equal to their awesomeness by their side.

The elevator's speed while ascending was set decidedly calm to avoid any complications with sudden changes in air pressure and the like. Even so, Miste felt her head steadily growing heavy as the cabin rose higher and higher within the tower of metal. Dani promised to the newbies that they would eventually get used to riding the elevators.

The first two levels, Sector #9 and Sector #8, zipped past the group beyond the wall of metal. Their goal would be the commercial district waiting a bit higher, at Sector #7. The group still had a few more days to kill before the Adventurer trial, and the best spot to look for lodging would be the area in the city that was largely reserved just for that.

* * *

As soon as the group set foot outside the elevator, a blast of sensorial stimuli hit them from all sides. Sector #7 was coated in

bright colors, flashing lights and signs filled with welcoming slogans, with vendors outside their shops waving for passersby to come and see what they had to offer. It was intensely noisy, with the thundering of thousands of footsteps against the pavement, endless lines of motor vehicles revving up their engines, aforementioned vendors shouting their jingles, and large radios streaming music by the shops, oftentimes close enough to each other to make the songs meld together into an incomprehensive mess. The entirety of Sector #7 was akin to a great summer festival spanning every nook and cranny of the area, open all day and all night, the whole year round.

As the group made their way through the sector, Miste couldn't decide where to look, for everything around her demanded her attention. The sea of alluring lights and colors seemed to extend into infinity, vaster than the oceans themselves.

Thinking how Sector #7 was only a fraction of the entirety of Magna Crux made Miste's head spin. She had declared in the past that she wanted to learn as much of the world as she could and see all that it had to offer, but witnessing the sheer size of the Royal Capital first-hand made her ponder whether it was even possible to experience everything that this single city had in store during one lifetime. *Humbling* – that was the single word best to describe the city.

Miste nudged closer to Zeriah and under his arm for a hug.

"Everything feels so overwhelmingly grand!"

"It certainly is lively, we've come far from Akrelion for sure."

Reiram and Dani led the group with confident stride in search for an inn with open rooms. All the spots closest to the elevators were currently occupied, unsurprisingly.

“Where do you want to look next, Rei-Rei? I’m thinking the eastside.”

“Are you kidding me?! And spend the night listening to people partying till sunrise? No thank you – I got my fill of merrymaking back with Zylan. I for one prefer to sleep my nights.”

“Point taken, westside it is.”

As the search for a place to stay went on, Miste began noticing how many of the passing people laid curious gazes on the group.

“We seem to be turning quite a few heads, Zeri.”

“Seems like it. I can’t really blame any of them for ogling though; you are an awesome treat to behold. I might even say that you are… *the apple of my eye*.”

“Hihi! Aww, aren’t you being sweet!”

Miste leaned to kiss Zeriah’s cheek.

“…And thank you.”

Dani twirled to walk backwards and aimed a crafty grin at the couple.

“Nice one, Big-Z! That’s some first class tongue-fencing if I’ve ever seen any.”

“The future *greatest-swordsman-in-the-world* ought to be fluent in all forms of swordplay, right?”

“Hehe, I read ya! As for the peeks and gazes, I reckon we are quite the snazzy-looking bunch. I certainly understand the fascination fully…”

Dani gave Ejrica a prolonged look along a winking smile. Although she returned the smile in kind, the exotic lady averted her gaze bashfully.

Reiram coughed loudly to attract the attention of the ragtag group behind him.

“Or maybe, just maybe, people are being wary around a group of armed people prancing through the Capital.”

Everyone instinctively clutched their trusted instruments, except Ejrica, who decided to simply smile in amusement.

“Yes… I believe Reiram is right, we don’t exactly look like we’re out shopping or such.”

“I hope we aren’t causing trouble.”

“Nah, no worries guys! Most folks living in the Capital just don’t visit the outside world that often. They aren’t used to seeing hunters in full gear and the like. In fact, I bet many of them realize that we’re Adventurers. Members of Hex Nova tend to stand out from the crowd.”

The group’s path led them through a large market plaza. The area was framed by dozens of fancy shops, with windows filled by pricy items. Every single coat, hat, necklace and perfume bottle would eat a whole year’s salary in alaxdrite mines to acquire. Numerous streets connected to the plaza, with rivers of people pacing every which way, sauntering about, forcing one to zigzag through the crowd.

Over the incoherent static of hundreds of people chatting amongst themselves, a peppy holler boomed to each corner of the plaza.

“Come, come, no need for shying! Its complimentary, we’re encouraging you to enjoying!!”

Middle of the plaza, three people had created an open space for themselves with long tables set in a triangular formation, one person stationed at each corner. The chocolate cupcakes that filled the tables moved fast as the trio handed them out to passing folk, along with flyers of some sort.

“There isn’t a struggle too challenging, nor a cause deemed unavailing, for our party is truly amazing, and with comforting pricing!! Leave what’s troubling you to the care of Hex Nova, the troupe specializing in adventuring!!”

The loudest of the trio – a bouncy woman with a pronounced way of twirling her vocabulary, sporting a distinct dress of red and white stripes – called out to Miste as she got the girl in her sights.

“A happy greeting, young miss!! Far away, are we coming? I can tell, no use hiding!”

The lady in red and white minced away from her post to hand out a cupcake to Miste.

“Meeting you is pleasing! Here, no need for excess savoring, the way to go is simply munching!”



Along the woman's sunny expression, the thing that immediately caught Miste's eye was the tri-hex emblem of Hex Nova which decorated her attire.

Only certified Adventurers wear that symbol! But what is an Adventurer doing here handing out treats?

The peppy woman kept shoving the cupcake closer to Miste's face.

"Now, now, it's not the time for gawking, rather biting in and enjoying!"

"Uhm… thanks. It looks really good."

And merely looking wasn't the extent of it; Miste had never tasted anything with such fluffy texture and richness in chocolate. The delectability of the treat came close to the apple tarts that Miss Berryjam would whip up in her bakery back in Akrelion – but only *close*.

"Delicious! It's an awesome explosion of chocolate!"

The lady Adventurer twirled around, making her red and white dress flutter in the wind, turning her into a living dreidel for a brief moment.

"Teehee, telling things that are already in my knowing… you are forcing me into blushing!!"

Miste was starting to question whether the lady Adventurer had been standing out in the sun for too long, or if she was coming from a different planet altogether.

The lady Adventurer's two companions came to present the rest of the group with cupcakes of their own. Compared to the quirky lady, the duo felt subdued in their mannerisms. One of them, a tall and slender man wearing a creamy-brown jacket, handed his treats with no words to spare, simply nodding with a thin smile. The other, a little girl wearing a cute dress of deep-browns with orange lace details, offered her share of the cupcakes with an excited grin and a cheery holler.

"Eat up folks!"

Before the group could follow the little girl's prompt, the quirky lady in red and white dress suddenly threw herself to hug Dani and Reiram, slamming the two against one another as she did.

"Reiram! And Dani!! A surprise to see you here, most delighting! You two knowing each other never came to my grasping!"

Reiram swiftly fought his way free from the lady's grip.

"Nope! No! Nuh-uh! I'm not going through this again! You're on your own, Dani."

Dani got trapped within the pincer-like squeeze all by himself.

"He–Hello, Annie… it's been a while…"

"It has been so long since your departing, you almost got me into worrying!"

The lady doubled her efforts to crush Dani inside her embrace.

"Urk… An–Annie… some air would be nice…"

"Ah! A proposition with no choice but agreeing, I suppose."

Dani slumped to the street and gasped for breath once the lady released her hold.

Ejrica dashed to squat next to Dani with alarm on her face.

"Are you alright?!"

"I'm fine… just… give me a sec…"

The quirky lady dropped a crafty smile on the duo at her feet.

"Teehee, my, my, what a fetching treat you're having. Nice going, Dani!"

Dani couldn't muster an answer from the midst of his wheezing. Ejrica was left rubbing her cheek awkwardly, unsure how to respond.

"This is an interesting group that you boys have roped into following. Especially you, Reiram, a crowd in your wake isn't something I'm used to seeing."

"Tch, neither should you get used to it, Mary-Ann. It won't become a habit."

"Same ol' Reiram, I see, always grumping."

The name that Reiram had called the lady by, *Mary-Ann*, got Miste's brain ticking with a sudden realization. She knew exactly who the quirky lady Adventurer was.

"No way! You're *Mary-Ann Kex*, aren't you? The head of *Kexworks* conglomerate? And one of the current magistrates of Hex Nova?"

The lady Adventurer twirled around to address Miste.

"I'm guilty as you're charging! The one, the only, Mary-Ann Kex, it's the name worth remembering, teehee! But I suppose I owe you a fuller introducing."

Mary-Ann twirled next to the lean man in creamy-brown jacket.

"This silent fellow is my younger brother Omar, a gentleman in the making. His dull exterior shouldn't cause any fretting – his privacy is simply his treasured keeping."

Omar had nothing to add to his sister's assessment of him.

Mary-Ann pirouetted onward, over to the little girl in chocolatey dress.

“And this lil cutie is my baby sister Suzu – the pureness in her smile is just dripping!”

“Hello, nice to meet you folks!”

Mary-Ann curtsied softly while smiling at Miste.

“It is quite humbling, to think that our family name has reached your hearing.”

“Of course, Mrs. Kex! You’re like one of the all-time greats! You’ve helped so many people! Wow… I… this is… I mean… I’ve been dreaming of becoming an Adventurer for so long… and now we are here… and then you are there… it’s just…”

Zeriah pressed his hand firmly against Miste’s back as she wobbled backwards.

“Take it easy, Miste, breathe.”

“R–Right!”

Mary-Ann’s expression exploded with delight.

“Glorious! A fresh batch of Adventurers is exactly what I was hoping!”

Suzu stepped forth with a peppy grin, handing Miste a flyer.

“We’re here to give the folks of the Capital a taste of the Guild’s kindness, and to recruit more good folk to join the Adventurers!”

“So deliciously abridging, that is exactly what we’re doing, Suzu.”

The flyer was about Hex Nova, outlining the Guild’s basic purpose, and encouraging people to leave all their worries to the Adventurers’ care. There was also info about the upcoming Adventurer trial a few days ahead.

"*I wish you'll be attending* – that's what I *would* be saying, but it's already on your mind, I'm feeling?"

"You bet! Not much else has been on my mind ever since I learned to read. I'm Miste, by the by, Miste Gauntlett. It's so awesome to get to meet you like this, Mrs. Kex."

"Why thank you, aren't you delighting!"

Mary-Ann clasped Miste's hand.

"And please, any excess titles should be dropping. *Mary-Ann*, or *Annie*, that's what I'm used to hear people calling. We'll soon be comrades with a common goal, so formalities are something I find no reasoning."

"Right… Thank you, Annie."

The lady adventurer beamed a pleased face at Miste. She danced around Miste and Zeriah while eyeing at the boy with uncanny interest.

"A young swordsman in the making? Oh, please tell me that the Adventurer trial is your reason for visiting!"

"Uh, sure, that's the plan. The name's Zeriah Walz."

"Ah! My heart is simply jumping! Two fine youngsters traveling all the way from Akrelion to join our guild, it gets me all emoting."

A common question rose from both Miste and Zeriah.

"Wait, how do you know we're from Akrelion?!"

A glint of smugness flashed in Mary-Ann's eyes.

"Oh, it is a simple matter of finding. You see, there's pollen from iceberg rose all over your clothing, and the scent of earth with you is quite distinguishing. Miners, I'm guessing? Akrelion is the

only mining town in Zirinia where such exotic flora is blooming.”

“…”

Mary-Ann’s assessment was on point, eerie to say the least. Miste and Zeriah had departed from their hometown over a month ago, and yet Mary-Ann claimed that such details of the town still lingered with them.

Reiram stepped in before the confusion could swell any further.

“Relax, you two. No need to think there’s any problem with your personal hygiene or such. Mary-Ann is an Astral Bearer – she has been granted extremely sharp senses. She can see, hear, taste and smell things that no other folk can.”

“Teehee, Reiram is absolutely right, no lying. I’m sorry, it wasn’t my intent to end up spooking.”

Miste shook her head softly.

“It’s okay, Annie. Actually, it’s kinda fun to think that a part of our home is still with us.”

Mary-Ann closed Miste and Zeriah within her embrace.

“I’m looking forward to the flavor you’ll end up adding. The turnout in the trial hasn’t been as grand as I’ve hoped these past few years, if I’m confessing. To know that there are still people willing to devote themselves to the life of adventuring, it is relieving!”

After a firm squeeze, the lady Adventurer slammed the two youngsters on the shoulder.

“On behalf of everyone from Hex Nova, I give you a wholehearted welcoming!”

Mary-Ann left the couple with a gleeful smile, and approached Dani and Ejrica with a bouncing twirl. Dani hid swiftly behind Ejrica, fearing another near-fatal hug from Mary-Ann.

Mary-Ann ended her twirling with a quick curtsy. She stared right into Ejrica's eyes, with the kind of gleam that a starving predator has when meeting a chinchilla.

"…As for you, desert flower, no gifting of extraordinary powers is needed to realize that you've come afar while traveling. A visitor from Serestria is a rare sight, humbling. Would you share your name, I'm praying."

Ejrica bowed deep at the lady Adventurer.

"Ejrica Nekaro. I've come to attend the trial in hopes of becoming an Adventurer alongside my friends. I hope you are willing to have me."

"My, a glorious day this is turning! I feel like celebrating! If I was the one deciding, the licenses would already be in your holding, but alas, till the trial ends, I shall be waiting."

Mary-Ann beamed her happiness on Ejrica.

"If you allow me saying, Ejrica Nekaro, yours is a heavy oath to carry; a vow of self-betterment and bolstering. Casting yourself to our cause is awe-inspiring!"

"You speak highly of me, thank you. I truly hope to meet the expectations of the Guild."

Mary-Ann left Ejrica with an encouraging nod. She moved closer to Reiram with a leaping pirouette.

"Your care for the Guild is eye-opening, Reiram. Your return comes at impeccable timing, and such wonderful gifts you're carrying… You have a knack for surprising!"

The lady Adventurer leaned closer to pinch Reiram's cheek, though she got her hand promptly swatted aside by the man.

"Ugh… I can assure you that everything between me and these striplings thus far has simply been due to a series of coincidences… Big… clingy… annoying… coincidences."

"Well, just so you know, more coincidences like these are something I'll be highly welcoming!"

Mary-Ann responded to Reiram's grumping with a warm smile. The lady turned to glance at the promo table where Omar and Suzu had already returned to their task of handing out cupcakes.

"Ah, my heart… *to stay chatting*… that is its message, it is simply screaming! But I'm sure you understand that PR isn't self-handling. Farewell till next time, at the trial – there we shall once more be seeing!"

The lady Adventurer curtsied peppily and returned to her work alongside her siblings.

* * *

After their meeting with Mary-Ann, the group continued to search for a place to stay – with no success. Even though Sector #7 was abundant with hotels, at the moment there were seemingly no vacant rooms anywhere.

Following a prolonged while of zigzagging through the endless market streets of Sector #7, the group decided to stop for a break over a warm cup of tea. *Ray of Ease*, a terrace café at the corner of a busy boulevard, offered a perfect place to relax amidst the commercial district's exhausting liveliness.

“Ooh, this is an interesting blend! It’s fruity, with a hint of nut. I’ve never had anything like it before.”

“Glad it’s to your liking, Mystic-M. It’s a common seasonal flavor here in the Capital. It’s made from the leaves of a chesterberry tree…”

Dani pointed at the sky, or rather at the plate of steel hanging partly above Sector #7.

“…They grow at the nature preserve of Sector #6. The flavor profile comes out best when the leaves are picked fresh from the tree during midsummer. Some folk make their living by harvesting the leaves daily and delivering them to restaurants around the Capital.”

“I see.”

Miste’s gaze drifted to observe the masses of people walking past the café. There were so many men and women packed to a single street, each following their own path with a confident stride, each of them standing out from the crowd in their own way, and each of them with no doubt a unique story to tell, were someone only to listen.

Among the crowd, Miste got fixated on a burly man carrying several sacks of flour. From the looks of it, the man had no problem handling his towering cargo on his own, although the high stack of sacks made it hard for him to see where he was going, and as such his stride was decidedly slow.

Even though Miste had dreamed of traveling to the Capital for the longest time, she couldn’t help but feel extremely small in the middle of all the hustle and bustle. She pondered whether a country girl like her could ever truly get used to the pace of the

city – after all, the literal smell of her hometown was still lingering on her.

“Everything in Magna Crux is so grand and filled with life, it’s overwhelming. I guess a place like this has all sorts of jobs that need doing.”

“Sure thing! And when it comes to the most extraordinary of tasks, that’s where we Adventurers come in. No need to fret, Mystic-M, you’ll feel like home in no time.”

“Well, so far I like it here. It may be overwhelming, but it’s also super exciting. And anyplace where I can get a cup of tea this good is great in my book! You should try it too, Zeri.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Zeriah took a sip of his berry-flavored soda with defiant gusto. He was the only one of the group who had decided to pass on the tea; he’d never been a fan.

As was traditional to Magna Crux, the café provided a set price for tea per table, as oppose to charging each customer individually. This made large parties of people around one table extremely common, often consisting of complete strangers. A table with vacant seats and a warm pot of tea marked an open invitation for anyone to join in for a moment of mingling.

Ejrica had been silent for unusually long, simply staring at her half empty cup of tea while deep in thought. Dani turned for the exotic lady and poured her a refill.

“How ‘bout you, Ejrica, do you like the tea?”

“It is quite delicious, thank you.”

The pair locked eyes and shared a moment of subdued smiles, ending with Ejrica turning her gaze away shyly.

Dani leaned across the table and reached for Reiram – more specifically for the hat resting on his face. Even with the Capital's traditions of mingling over a pot of tea, Reiram had held up his usual secluded demeanor. Just as Dani's hand brushed against the brim of Reiram's hat, the man growled from underneath.

"Touch my hat and your body will never be found…"

It was uncanny how Reiram was able to deliver a death threat with such a deadpan manner as he did.

"Oh good, you're awake. It's hard to tell sometimes, hehe! I was just meaning to ask where you wanted to search next. We've scouted most of the westside already. I mean, there are way more hotels over on the east end, just saying."

"No! I refuse!! I will not set foot into that sanity-forsaken den of pastel colors and artificial sunshine!"

Miste butted in with curiosity.

"What is at the eastside exactly?"

"Lemme tell ya, Mystic-M, it's awesome! You see–"

"It's horrible! The entire eastside of Sector #7 is an infinite sea of cabarets, casinos, amusement parks, and… karaoke bars… If you think Sector #7 is lively and crowded as is, then eastside is even more dense version of it. It's nothing but endless color, and noise, and people everywhere, all day, all night. Simply thinking about it makes me want to puke."

"What a surprise, Rei-Rei gets cranky by the mere mention of fun."

“Too much fun and I might end up as a numbskull like a certain younger colleague of mine. I’m simply trying to hold on to what little sanity I’m still left with.”

“Heh, no need to get worked up, Rei-Rei, I’m just messing with ya! Eastside can be fun, no doubt, but I too prefer a bit of tranquility when I sleep. We’ll find someplace to stay in, no worries–”

“Whoaah!! Look out folks!”

With his back turned towards the boulevard, Dani had no time to react to the incoming danger before it was too late.

A hefty sack of flour thumped on Dani’s head, ripping open and spreading its powdery contents all over the boy. A lungful of the stuff left Dani hacking for air.

“Graah… hagh… gah… wha… what the… pftff…?”

The way that Dani got suddenly painted over with chalky white, with a large pile of flour rising from his head like a cone of snow, was undeniably amusing. Ejrica turned away from the table while covering her mouth to hold back her titters. Miste burst out laughing so hard that she accidentally sprayed some of her tea through her nose. Zeriah leaned his face against his hand while sniggering past his palm.

“Haha! Hey, Dani, you seem to have a slight dandruff-problem. I can recommend a good soap for that.”

“Oh, hardy-har, very funny!”

Everybody at the terrace nudged decidedly away from Dani as he began swatting himself clean of flour. A violent sneeze exploded from within the cloud of white dust.

“Bah… dude… not cool…”

The same burly man whom Miste had noticed earlier dropped the rest of his flour sacks and leapt over the terrace's railing. He began helping Dani wipe himself clean.

"Are you alright?! I'm so sorry! I should've been more careful. Sorry, sorry, sorry…"

Dani slapped the man's hands aside.

"Chill man! I'm fine."

One of the waitresses of the café arrived at the scene and handed Dani a wet cloth to wipe himself clean properly. As suddenly as the commotion had risen, the mood of the terrace café fell tranquil just as swiftly.

The burly man bowed at the group of Adventurers, deep enough that he almost slammed his forehead against the ground.

"Please forgive me, it was not my intention to cause trouble."

Despite the man's rugged exterior, his voice betrayed him as rather young, most likely in his early thirties. His frame and posture were like those of a professional athlete, yet his soft eyes and gently curving cheekbones radiated earnest warmth – a gentle giant. The feel that Miste got from the man immediately brought up memories of Roger Jolovia from Powderberg. Only positive memories, mind you.

Once Dani was done wiping himself, his attire was still filled with white stripes all over.

"No use fretting over little things. It's all fine. Sorry 'bout your merchandise, though."

"Well, it is as you said, no use fretting over something so small. I still have plenty left."

The burly man jumped over the terrace's railing and back on the boulevard. He snatched his remaining cargo to rest over his arms and turned to leave.

"Once again, sorry for troubling you folks. Have a good one."

There was still a dangerously high and wobbly stack of flour sacks left. Before the man could get far, Miste hollered after him.

"Are you sure you don't need any help with that?"

"Oh, no need to worry over me, Miss…"

"Miste! Miste Gauntlett."

"…Miss Gauntlett. I'll be fine, thank you."

"How far do you have to go?"

"Ah…! Well… it's… quite a ways actually… I'm heading to Sector #3."

Dani flipped to sit backwards in his chair and shot a disbelieving look at the man.

"Say what?! You're going on foot? With all that stuff? There are easier ways to get exercise, y'know!"

"Haha, I am aware of that. It's not that bad to be honest. My place resides close to the elevators."

"Yeah, but this place here sure doesn't!"

Dani and Miste turned for each other, with a common idea sparking in their eyes.

"Mystic-M, we could…!"

"We totally should…!"

Reiram reached over the table and gave both youngsters a sharp smack on the head.

“What you two *ought* to do right now is gear up, if either of you wishes to sleep with a roof over your head.”

“Yeah, yeah… I know…”

“Chillax Rei-Rei, there are still plenty of inns we haven’t checked yet. One of them must have open rooms left.”

The man with hefty cargo pricked up his ears.

“Wait, are you folks looking for a place to stay? Funny thing, it just so happens that my place has plenty of room to spare, if you’re interested.”

For the group of Adventurers, their first day in Magna Crux was shaping up to be one of happy coincidences.

Miste jumped over to the boulevard and grabbed a pair of flour sacks from the burly man.

“Awesome! We’re totally interested! Right, guys?”

“Hey, a place to stay is a place to stay, I’m cool with that! Big-Z? Ejrica?”

“I’m fine with whatever.”

“I certainly have no objections.”

Reiram spent a moment eyeing at the burly man.

“Sector #3, huh…? Should be nice and calm there, and it’s close to the Guild as well.”

“Then it’s decided! Thanks so much, mister!”

Everyone in the group took part in easing the man’s workload.

“Hahaa! Well, this here ended up quite nicely, I must say! And no need to worry over payments or such, the pleasure is all mine. It’s the least I can offer in exchange for all the hubbub I caused. The name’s Egon – *Egon Talmond*.”

VERSE #32: SWEET WHITES CAFÉ & BAKERY

Traveling from one sector of Magna Crux to another was like being transported to some faraway realm in a blink of an eye. The noise and commotion of Sector #7 was firmly in the past, remaining approximately a kilometer below the group of Adventurers.

As the door of the elevator opened to reveal Sector #3, the sharp contrast in architecture, mood and feel between the Capital’s different areas hit Miste as shocking. It was truly like arriving to an entirely different city.

From the towering center of the Capital, a sole grand boulevard shot through the entirety of Sector #3, curving just slightly so that the two ends were hidden from one another. Along the main street, hundreds upon hundreds of side streets dotted the path – winding, looping, splitting and merging, coming together as a labyrinth of finely carved stone that extended across the sector. The intricate adornments on the sides of the buildings, the beautiful archways, the nooks and crannies between each alleyway and side street, filled with parks, gardens and serene terraces, all of it left the impression that every single inch of the sector had been handcrafted with love, care, and purpose. Sector #3 was first and foremost a city-wide sculpture, a romantic painting come to life, and a town second.

Soothing, a perfect singular word to describe the ambiance of Sector #3. Even at the busiest point of afternoon there were scarce few people pacing about, a far cry from the asphyxiating feel of the commercial district of Sector #7. After hours of zigzagging inside an endless sea of people, a bit of personal space felt like a vacation.

As the group passed by a tiny park at a street corner, growing with maple and orange tulip, Miste hear a bird singing from its treetop nest. Even amidst its high grandeur, Sector #3 also held much of the simple hominess of a rural town such as Akrelion.

Egon's home was only a brief stroll away from the elevators; third alley to the left from the main street, then two blocks down, along a winding road paved with maroon tiles, then left once more. Though it was a short walk, the group's decidedly relaxed pace gave them ample time to chat with their new friend and enjoy the sights.

It was hard to believe the string of good luck and happy coincidences scattered along the path of the Adventurers. Out of all the possible people that the group could've crossed paths with in the Capital, it ended up being *Egon Talmond*, husband of *Samsara Talmond*; the lady captain from the Knights of Minerva whom the group had worked with back in Powderberg. Samsara was apparently yet to return home from her latest mission.

During their brief time alongside Egon, it had come apparent to the group that the man had a similarly steely and noble heart as his wife. Upon learning that his new friends knew Samsara, Egon had announced that they would be welcome to stay at their home for as long as they'd wish. Curiously, Egon had no

questions concerning how or where the group had met Samsara, nor how she was doing at the moment.

“Samsara prefers to keep her work out of our home, and I respect that. You folks are her friends, and that is more than enough for me.”

Egon’s warm smile and soft chuckle vouched for his sincerity.

The Talmond residence was a three-storey building made of white stone on a narrow street leading towards a teensy market plaza. The entirety of the front wall was ensnared by a growth of vines blooming with tiny red flowers. Behind the flora, a keen eye could make out a discolored patch of wall, a place where there used to be a sign of some sort. Now, there was a simple stand next to the front door, touting *Sweet Whites Café & Bakery* to be open for business. A note on the door promised that the manager of the place would be *Back in no time*.

“Here we are, folks! It ain’t too fancy, but I hope you like your stay.”

As Egon pushed the door open, with the doorbell ringing out a welcoming chime, a rush of warm nostalgia instantly washed over Miste. The ground floor of the house was dedicated for the bakery-café as advertised outside. The inner décor consisted of warm and natural colors, soft browns and melting orange, with a touch of creamy-white lace in table cloths to give the room an elegant and fresh feeling. The walls were covered in rows upon rows of tall baskets, filled to the brink of bursting with beautifully baked bread in all kinds of shapes and sizes, flavors and grains. A sizable vitrine stood at the back end of the room and next to the counter, displaying a selection of handcrafted bonbons in giftwrapped boxes. The scent of heated oven and

honied dough wafted in the air, no doubt permanently imprinted on the walls.

Although Egon's bakery was far more polished and sophisticated in its sensibilities, to Miste, there was a sense of the exact same love and sweetness that characterized *Berryjam's Bakery* back in Akrelion. Miste felt like she was instantly at home. She began dreaming of a chance to taste Egon's version of her all-time favorite treat – apple tarts.

"Thanks a ton for the help! You guys made the trek a whole lot more manageable. Just leave the sacks over there at the counter."

With the collective thumping of about twenty sacks of flour against the floor, the group of Adventurers couldn't help but wonder how Egon normally managed to carry such a load all by himself. His mighty physique was certainly not just for show.

Egon seated the group at the table nearest to the counter.

"You folks just unwind a while, and have some tea if you haven't had your fill yet. I got a fresh batch of cookies from this morning that are in dire need of tasting – hope you like white chocolate."

Egon disappeared into a narrow hallway behind the counter and returned a second later with a plate of cookies. The wall next to the counter housed a large tea-brewer unit, from which Egon poured a pot-full of chesterberry tea for the group.

As soon as the cookies and tea were firmly on the table, Egon proceeded to haul the flour sacks down the hallway and into the kitchen. A chuckling holler echoed from the hallway.

"I'm not hearing any munching! Go on, they ain't for eating with your eyes, y'know. Dig in!"

In one word, the cookies were *amazing*. The way the dough melted down with only a soft nibble, spreading a creamy smooch to caress one's taste buds with a touch of nut and white chocolate was simply exquisite. Egon certainly knew his stuff. Moreover, the chesterberry tea was a perfect companion for the cookies.

As soon as Egon was done with his task, the man of the house took a seat among his guests.

"Whew! There, all done. Now all that's left is to kick back for a while and enjoy, hahaa! So, how are the cookies?"

Miste was eager to shower praise on Egon, even with her mouth currently filled with cookies and tea. As one could guess, the girl ended up nearly choking on her treats.

"Fhey fah lihhy huudth!!"

Zeriah translated Miste's mumbling.

"What Miste is trying to say is that they are delicious."

Dani leaned for the plate of cookies to grab another treat.

"Soooooo good… Can we stay forever…?"

"Hahah, well gee, thank you all! I'm glad they came out fine, wouldn't want to serve trash to the folks, now would we, haha!"

Egon poured himself a cup of tea. The baker dipped his cookie in his drink before having a taste.

"Oh, yes… quite right… hmm… Maybe just a tad more butter for the next batch…"

The man leaned back in his chair and flashed a satisfied smile at his group of guests.

“This is nice. It’s been a while since the last time I’ve had a cup of tea with someone like this. Don’t you think the brew simply tastes better with other people around – like the tealeaves themselves know that they ought to make a moment amongst friends special?”

Miste managed to fight down the cookie stuck in her throat.

“I agree, one hundred percent! I think there’s nothing in life that can’t be amplified by having someone to enjoy it with you!”

Miste’s eyes instinctively sought out Zeriah’s gaze. The boy nodded back at her with a soft smirk.

Egon threw a warm grin at the young couple.

“Great, so it ain’t just me!”

The man gave his numbed-out shoulders a stretch with audible crunching.

“Your rooms will be on the third floor. They’ve been out of use for a good while, but the sheets and such are all brand spanking new, so it should be fine – mind the dust. This place used to be a hotel back in the day, you see. I inherited the place from my old man about seventeen years ago. The whole hostel thing never really grabbed me, so I decided to renovate the place into a bakery, after all, the kitchen was already nice and robust. All it took was a dash of paint, and ta-dah!”

“I think it looks wonderful, real homey. Thanks for having us like this, Egon.”

“Think nothing of it, anything for Samsara’s friends. I’m just glad I’m able to do this much. It’s quite exciting to have the house full of Adventurers of all people. Don’t get me wrong, I’m

not trying to bloat your egos or anything, but I think you folks are doing some real good in the world."

As he spoke, Egon's gaze gravitated towards Reiram.

"You said your name was *Reiram*, right?"

"Yes."

"I have the oddest feeling like I've heard that name somewhere? Where do I know you from?"

"Sorry, I can't help you. As far as I know, we've never met before."

"Huh… Well, alright then, guess I remember it wrong."

Just then, the doorbell's chime echoed through the bakery.

The new arrival was a young boy with distinctly sharp features and a jagged hairdo. He was wearing a formal-looking suit, with a schoolbag drooping over his shoulder – fashion choices that were clearly not his own. The youngster's expressionless gaze drifted along the floor as he strolled through the bakery, right past the group sitting near the counter, and towards the staircase in the corner of the room.

"How was school, Izak?"

Egon's voice reached the boy just as he climbed the first step. With a disinterested glance at the table, Egon in particular, the boy threw his answer with a dry laugh.

"It was *school*, dad. It simply *was*."

The boy yanked his necktie loose and continued his climb upstairs.

"Well, come on and say hello. There are some people I'd like you to meet."

With drooping steps and a wide roll of his eyes, the boy paced back down the stairs.

Egon stood up to meet the boy and dropped his hand over the little one's shoulder.

"Everyone, this bundle of joy here is my son, Izak. Don't let his frowny demeanor put you off, he gets that from his mother, in reality he's a sweet kid."

"Ugh… Real smooth, dad… awesome…"

"Izak, these folks here are Miste, Zeriah, Dani, Reiram, and Miss Ejrica Nekaro. They'll be staying with us for a while."

"Renting the dust-chambers upstairs for extra moolah, are ya? Is your baking business going under or something?"

"Ha-ha… aren't you the little comedian… They are friends of your mother and need a place to stay for a while. Reiram and Dani here are Adventurers, and Miste, Zeriah and Miss Nekaro have traveled far to take part in this year's trial."

Izak's eyes lit up ever so slightly upon hearing his mother getting mentioned. The boy walked up to the table and gave the group a thin smile with a nod.

"Howdy… and stuff… cool to have ya."

The group's responses muddled together into a big clumpy *hello*.

"Don't let dad pin you guys as guinea pigs for his more outlandish bakings… Trust me, stick to the simple stuff."

The youngster snatched a fistful of cookies from the table and dashed up the stairs.

Egon threw a sighing bark in his son's wake.

“Just so you know – experimentation is the only path to discovery!”

A series of swishing sounds resounded from the upper floor, like a whirlwind raging indoors. Izak appeared back down the stairs a moment later. His formal wear had switched for a casual jacket and jeans – undoubtedly a more natural fit for the youngster. In addition to his new look, he had traded his schoolbag for a skateboard.

“If anybody needs me, I’ll be… Well, tell them to wait till I return. Laters!”

After his swift makeover, the air around Izak had adopted a sense of unstoppable confidence; the boy dashed for the front door and slipped outside just as swiftly.

Egon managed to holler after his son just before the door snapped back shut.

“Have fun! Dinner will be ready by seven, in case you’re interested…”

As the sound of Izak’s steps drew away from the bakery, Egon shook his head with a chuckling sigh.

“I swear, that boy sure has his own way of doing things.”

Miste turned for the baker with a peppy smile.

“He seems like a nice kid.”

“Hahah, when he’s in the mood for it, then yes. But seriously, a father couldn’t ask for a better son. He’s bright, independent, and tries to stay out of trouble to the best of his ability. You might not guess from the look of him, and he certainly won’t let it show, but he’s actually quite studious.”

Egon paced behind the counter and threw on a brown apron, transforming himself to match the bakery's décor.

"It's about time I got to work, this place will soon be filled with folks hungry for some sweets and tea."

"With cookies this good, I bet there are people coming from all over the Capital!"

"Hahah, nah, mostly regulars, local folk from Sector #3. No widespread fame for me, though I dare say that I've built quite a solid fanbase in these parts."

Miste bounced to stand and skipped for the counter.

"Is there something I can do to help?"

"Huh?! Oh, no, no, I'll manage just fine. I don't have a habit of putting my guests into work. Thanks for considering though, Miste."

"Are you sure? If there's anything at all, I'd really like to help. I feel bad just mooching from you like this."

"Well, if you honestly feel that way, I guess there's always work to go around."

"Awesome! Just don't let me anywhere near uncooked food, and we should be fine."

"Right…? Then perhaps you could wait the tables?"

"Got it! You can count on me."

Ejrica rose up with a graceful motion and joined Miste by the counter.

"If you don't mind, I would like to offer my help as well. It simply wouldn't do to leave your overwhelming hospitality unpaid, Mr. Talmond."

“Hahaha! Alright, sure, if you gals truly feel like helping out, who am I to stop you…”

Egon aimed a prolonged grin at Ejrica with a chuckle.

“…sorry, I can’t remember the last time a lady has referred to me as *Mr. Talmond*. Makes me feel like some kind of bigshot.”

“I apologize for any flusterment I may have caused. I am simply upholding the customs of my people, I certainly mean no offence.”

“It’s okay, I have taken none of the sort. I think it’s important for all of us to remember where we come from. I can only hope you’ll one day honor me with first name basis, Miss Nekaro.”

Ejrica’s lips curved into a sly smile.

“It is my firm intention. You see, Serestrian customs dictate that peoples’ hearts come bound together when facing a common obstacle, or task, if you will. Put simply: by working with you, we become siblings in arms. Your wife and I already fought against a common threat in Powderberg, different fronts though it may have been. I very much wish to add you to my circle of siblings as well, Mr. Talmond.”

The exotic lady bowed deep at the baker. The man answered the gesture with an upbeat nod.

“Man, you Serestrian folk are something else entirely. I read ya loud and clear, let’s get to that bonding right away, shall we.”

“Let’s indeed!”

Somehow, Ejrica’s words made Miste feel all warm and giddy inside. When it came to unity amongst people, Serestrian philosophy wasn’t that far off from the way that Miste had always imagined Hex Nova to be. To Miste, the Guild of

Adventurers represented a life of freedom, and a chance for people to come together to work towards common goals.

You'll make a super awesome Adventurer, Ejrica! The Guild will be tenfold stronger by having you!

Dani took after the girls and sprung up from his seat, though not before stuffing his face with a few more cookies.

"If Ejrica and Mystic-M got things covered here, we could go check our new digs in the meantime. How 'bout it, Big-Z?"

"Why not, sounds mildly interesting."

"Well, aren't you full of unrestrained zeal…"

"It's just sleeping quarters, Dani, how much can there be to see?"

The boys climbed to the upper floors as a single unit.

Left to sit alone, Reiram excused himself from the table and started after the boys.

"Thanks for the hospitality. I'll go make sure those two dunces don't cause too much damage."

Egon led Miste and Ejrica to the backroom beyond the counter.

"Now then, before we do anything else, let's get you ladies dressed for the occasion."

A muffled voice resounded from the third floor and into the bakery.

"Holy crap! These rooms are huge! My room back home isn't this big!"

"Woohoo! The beds are like trampolines!"

"Get the hell down from there, you idiot!"

“I ain’t kidding, it’s super bouncy! Try it, Rei-Rei!”

“That’s not the point!!!”

* * *

“Uhm… Am I wearing this right…?”

“You look great, Ejrica!”

“R–Really? I just… it’s kinda embarrassing… I mean… I’ve never worn a dress like this before…”

“Neither have I, but it’s real cute though!”

“Both of you girls look mighty lovely. I’ve had these outfits just collecting dust since forever. Good to see them finally get some use.”

“So… who were these for originally?”

“Oh, no one in particular. A man can dream though, right?”

“Uh… yeah… sure…”

The uniforms that Egon had provided for Miste and Ejrica matched the bakery’s feel quite nicely. Soft orange, chocolate brown and creamy white, a striking cut, a bit of fine lace, with a cute and flowing skirt – the outfit was tailored to bring out the feminine charms of its carrier. Their new look had transformed the two ladies into a seamless part of the décor.

“Are you sure about this, Miste? I feel rather ludicrous wearing this…”

“Come on, don’t resign right off the bat! Give it a little time, you might end up liking it.”

“If you say so…”

Zeriah and Dani were sitting back at the table and waiting for the girls as they returned to the counter from their venture in the backroom. Miste took Ejrica by the hand and led the duo into striking a pose.

“Ta-dah! So, what do you guys think?”

Zeriah’s face twitched into an adoring smile.

“Whow… Miste… you look real pretty.”

“Hihi, thanks Zeri!”

Miste felt Ejrica’s hand squeezing against her palm. The exotic lady took a firm bite of her lip while her gaze darted around the room, evading the keen eyeing from Dani. As the boy’s ogling went on for a prolonged while in silence, Ejrica took a discreet peek at him.

“D–Don’t just stare! Say something.”

“I think it’s–”

“Yes, I know, I must look absolutely ridiculous.”

“No, that’s not it at all. I think you look nice in a dress. The color brings out your eyes.”

The squeeze of Ejrica’s hand intensified around Miste’s. Her subdued flusterment never ceased to make Miste grin. Ejrica was the absolute worst at taking compliments.

“Th–Thank you, Dani…”

Miste brought the duo’s hands towards the ceiling in a triumphant howl.

“Wooh! Test run for the new look: *Done*! Results: *A Smashing Success*!”

Egon clasped his hands together in applause.

“Hahah, the customers are sure in for a rare treat today!”

Miste took a quick peer across the room in search for the missing person of the group.

“Where’s Reiram? Wasn’t he with you guys?”

“He stayed upstairs to catch a few winks.”

“The allure of those nice ‘n’ comfy beds must have caught Rei-Rei by surprise. The moment he laid down, his lights went out just like that.”

“I guess he couldn’t get much sleep back on the riverboat.”

“Poor thing…”

“You know how it can get with old friends; Rei-Rei and Mr. Koipany likely stayed up all night drinking and reminiscing the past.”

“I don’t exactly see Reiram as the reminiscing type…”

“Or maybe he just stayed up all night to guard over everyone else’s sleep. He’s really an ol’ softie like that.”

A muffled grumble sounded through the ceiling.

“I heard that!!!”

* * *

As expected from an establishment residing at a tranquil nook of a serene part of a peaceful sector, *Sweet Whites Café & Bakery* was void and empty of customers for a large part of the day. The one truly busy time for the bakery came at late afternoons, as the local folks returned home from their own hard days at work.

For many, a cup of tea and a slice of sweet and fluffy cake at the end of the day was just the thing for unwinding.

During the afternoon rush, Miste and Ejrica's job was to greet the customers and carry treats to the tables, leaving Egon's hands free to prepare the orders. The surprise presence of a pair of dashing young ladies garnered a hefty amount of praise from the regulars.



“My, my, the service has certainly received an upgrade since yesterday.”

“Finally decided to hire some help, eh Egon? ‘Bout time!”

“Truly fetching young ladies.”

“Ooh, what an exotic beauty.”

“Such sweet girls. The tea and cookies are lovely as ever, thank you dears.”

The flow of customers was constant for nearly two hours, then suddenly stopped. The calming of business came in sync with the setting of the sun. Amber light flooded the streets of Sector #3, washing through the bakery’s window to fill the room with beams of calming gold.

“Whew, that’s pretty much it for the day. Lemme tell you, a couple of extra hands makes this way more manageable. Thank you for the assist, Miste. And… *Ejrica*?”

Ejrica smiled at Egon and bowed with added gusto.

“Thank you for the opportunity, it was rather interesting experience to say the least, *Egon*.”

Miste jumped at Ejrica and caught her inside a twirling embrace.

“YES! We totally rocked people’s socks off! Did you see, Ejrica, I didn’t even drop a single plate! Go me!”

“That’s… uhm… really great, Miste… You should be proud.”

“Hihi… Sorry, I just sorta have a mild case of kitchen-related PTSD…”

* * *

At the end of the day, Ejrica offered to help Egon prepare the supper, leaving Miste in charge of the cleanup.

After carrying out the trash over to a nearby alley, Miste took a moment for a breather before heading back inside the bakery.

She turned to admire the rivers of amber that blazed above the Capital's rooftops.

Although Miste knew that the skies above Magna Crux were the same as everywhere else in the world – the very same she'd spent her whole life gazing at while dreaming wide awake – today, something felt different. The colors of sunset were way more intense, and the odd few clouds drifting by were the fluffiest she'd ever seen.

With each moment she spent in the Capital, and with each passing second that brought her closer to realizing her lifelong dream, Miste felt her heart beating ever more merrily.

The bakery's doorbell chimed softly upon Miste's return, welcoming her back home. The doorbell had such a simple sound, yet one that never failed to fill Miste's heart with joyous feelings. The rush she got from it was nearly addictive. The bakery held an innate sense of comfort, it was home to some wonderful people, and for now, Miste had the privilege to call it her home as well. The place, the people around her, and the time she lived right now – she wouldn't have changed even the slightest thing.

Not long after Miste's entry, the doorbell rang out once again behind her. Acting on instinct, she turned around and threw a wide smile towards the entrance.

"Welcome! How can I be of service…? Ah!"

The woman standing in the doorway stared at Miste with dumbfounded expression. The surprise was mutual between them both.

With her blazing-red military coat fluttering in the wake of her strut, *Samsara Talmond* entered the bakery. The lady knight

walked up to Miste and kept staring at the girl with disbelief. Samsara's naturally stern stance and steely stare were enough to make Miste stiffen in place, for reasons she herself didn't fully understand.

"Miste?"

"Y–Yeah… it's me."

Samsara gave her eyes a weary rub.

"Sorry, don't mind me… I was just trying to assess how tired I am exactly… For a second there I thought I was seeing phantoms."

"No worries, I'm the real deal!"

"Yes, there is certainly only one you."

The lady knight flashed a thin smile at Miste.

"This is a nice surprise, how have you been?"

"I have been… busy?"

"Haha, I can see that. I know that when it comes to you I really shouldn't be that surprised to find you at unexpected places at unexpected times, but what exactly are you doing here?"

Miste gave Samsara an abridged version of the group's time in Magna Crux thus far, about how they'd met Egon and about his generosity towards the group.

"Your husband has been real kind to us. I hope we aren't being a bother to you, Samsara."

"Perish the thought. It's a happy coincidence if anything. And from the looks of it, I think you've already paid back Egon's kindness in full."

Samsara seated herself at the table nearest to the bakery's counter. She threw her legs to cross, leaned softly back and remained quietly gazing at the direction of the kitchen, waiting patiently.

Soon, Egon arrived at the counter, his head snapping immediately to Samsara. A subdued smile rose on both their faces as the two locked gazes.

"I thought I heard the sweet voice of my dearest lil robin."

"My, someone has been tasting their own dough… your tongue is covered in sugar."

"Hmm? You don't approve?"

Egon walked up to Samsara with pronounced step. The couple's gazes were firmly glued to one another. Egon kneeled next to Samsara and laid his hand on the back of her head. The couple shared a short kiss, and remained with their heads pressed together.

"Welcome home, dear."

"I'm happy to finally be home…"

From the softness in both their voices, and the slight tremble on Samsara's lips, Miste could sense a lot of held-back passion, tucked away for the sake of courtesy. Miste had seen glimpses of Samsara's softer side in the past, but the way the lady looked at Egon while the couple held each other close was something else entirely. Warmth like this was bound to lift a smile on Miste's face.

Egon… Samsara… I'm so happy for you guys.

Samsara broke the couple's embrace and straightened her posture.

“Where’s Izak?”

“He went out.”

“I see…”

Samsara let out a silent sigh. The dryness in her retort spoke volumes of her state, like she was tired in more ways than one.

Egon gave his wife a comforting rub on the shoulder with a smile.

“Do you want some tea?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Just when Egon managed to place a cup of tea along a serving of cookies in front of Samsara, Ejrica arrived at the counter from the kitchen, as well as did Zeriah and Dani from the upper floor. The trio gathered to greet Samsara.

Zeriah’s eyes gleamed with excitement at the chance to meet the honored lady knight once more. He was about to offer his hand for the lady, but midway decided to act it cooler and ended up rustling his own hair awkwardly.

“Captain Tal– uh… I mean Samsara, it’s good to see you.”

Dani slouched to sit next to the lady knight.

“Hi Sam-Yam! I see you’re having tea and cookies, good choice, those have been flying off the shelves the whole day, hehe.”

Samsara scanned Zeriah and Dani with an approving nod and a thin smile.

“Glad to see you boys are as full of energy as ever.”

Ejrica gave Samsara a soft bow, made noticeably softer by the cute waitress’s dress on her.

“Hello, and welcome home. It has been a while, I hope you are doing well.”

Samsara’s eyes widened as she got a look at Ejrica’s getup.

“Thank you, I’m doing fine…”

A chuckling smile on Samsara’s lips made Ejrica avert her gaze in embarrassment.

“I… ah… I know my outfit is somewhat unusual…”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I’m simply surprised, I never thought you as one to wear something so… spiffy. I think the dress suits you, quite well actually.”

Samsara gave Egon a sly glare.

“Got someone to finally wear these, huh?”

“Great, ain’t it? Ejrica and Miste both look smashing, the customers loved them! Don’t you think they bring a certain sense of class to this place?”

“Agreed, though I hope you aren’t holding any hopes of keeping them. Adventurers are sure to have their hands full even without tea pots and plates of cake.”

“I know, I know, it’s just nice to see the dresses get some use. You should try it on sometime too, I bet you would look quite striking wearing it.”

Egon and Samsara held a silent staring contest while sharing jokey smiles. The lady knight ended the match with a shake of her head and took an indulgent sip of her tea.

“Katanas and dresses don’t go well together.”

Dani bobbed his head in agreement while beaming a crafty look at Zeriah.

“Sam-Yam is quite right. I for one couldn’t imagine Big-Z for example pulling off the whole *sword & dress -look*…”

The bakery exploded with laughter as the ridiculous image filled everyone’s mind. Even Zeriah snickered at the thought.

“I don’t know, Dani… that almost sounded like a challenge…?”

Egon slammed his hand over Zeriah’s shoulder and caught the boy in a firm hold.

“Hahah, for the sake of everyone’s eyes here… and to keep us from busting our guts from laughter… it’s best we leave that to imagination.”

Zeriah nodded and dropped his gaze to the floor, a bit embarrassed.

Samsara took another sip of her tea while humming softly.

“It almost feels like we never left Powderberg… Miste, Zeriah, Dani, Ejrica… you haven’t changed a bit.”

The lady knight’s satisfied beaming was suddenly cut short as she noticed Reiram marching down the stairs and into the bakery.

“Hello, little Sammy.”

Samsara shot an icy glare at the elder Adventurer from behind her cup of warm tea. A moment of awkward silence enveloped the room. Reiram and Samsara kept eyeing one another from afar – the man with a face utterly void of emotion, and the lady with bubbling loathing that was held back barely by constant swallowing.

Miste imagined that if Samsara was a cat, she would be in the middle of mad hissing right about now.

Samsara put on the fakest of smiles imaginable and turned for Egon.

“Egon… dear… what is *he* doing here…?”

“Hm? Is there a problem? I thought Reiram was your friend.”

“He… has a strange idea of how friends are supposed to act…”

Samsara stabbed Reiram with another frosty glare.

It was regrettable, but time would not always heal old wounds. Samsara was clearly still far from forgiving Reiram for the things he’d done in the past. The elder Adventurer had been part of Samsara’s unit during the Blood-Border War sixteen years ago, and a comrade whom the lady knight had held in utmost respect. Yet, midst a decisive battle, Reiram had faked his own death, leaving the then-young lady knight to carry the grief of losing her friend for over a decade, until the pair was united in the town of Baltric close to a month ago. No one could blame Samsara for feeling anger over Reiram’s deception, nor could anyone expect her to suddenly forgive him. The situation was regrettable indeed.

Egon, who was the only one not in the know about his wife’s past with Reiram, was left peering at the two old acquaintances with confusion.

“Hmm… *Reiram*… Now I’m sure I’ve heard that name before–”

Samsara got up defiantly, cutting Egon a tad short, and slammed her palm against the table.

“You truly got some nerve, Reiram! Taking advantage of Egon’s hospitality, even though you must have known exactly who he is, and even though you knew exactly how I’d feel about it! How

dare you associate yourself with the others like this!? You do not deserve Egon's open arms the same way they do!"

"Hey, wow, take it easy–"

"No, I won't!! I won't stand his lies soiling our home!"

The frost in Samsara's stare seeped to every corner of the room.

"Well!? Have you nothing to say for yourself!?"

Reiram kept meeting the lady knight's stare bravely.

"I won't make excuses. I'm sorry, little Sammy."

The man paced through the bakery and towards the front door.

"I appreciate the warm welcome, Egon, but I think it's best if I find some other place to stay."

Everyone gave each other concerned looks, unsure what to say. A simple plea would be useless to change Samsara's mind, her loathing for Reiram was certainly well-tempered and not easily averted.

Right before Reiram reached the doorway, Egon slipped to block his way. The baker had his usual relaxed smile decorating his face.

"Now, now, let's not get all hasty here. Whatever is going on between you two, it can't be that bad. Why don't we sit down for a sec and talk things through?"

Reiram returned Egon's smile with a dismissive shrug.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, but little Sammy made her stance already crystal clear. In all honesty, I was hoping to slip away before she'd return to the Capital. That's the kind of person I am."

Reiram tried to nudge past Egon, but the baker pressed his palm firmly against his chest, once again stopping him on his tracks.

“Is that so…? Somehow, I’m having hard time believing that whole act; as if you don’t care…”

Egon reached out to everyone gathered around the table.

“You guys are all friends, right? Is Reiram really that horrible, enough to be worth throwing out?”

“Well, he can be mean when he feels like it, and is prone to get grumpy sometimes, but… He can also be really caring.”

“He is definitely a pain, but I don’t think anyone would deny he’s effective at what he does.”

“Rei-Rei has never hesitated to take a blow for the team, he’s the man, hehe!”

“We all fought together against a common threat, and Reiram has not once turned his back at us.”

Reiram tugged the brim of his hat to hide his face.

“Give me a break…”

Egon wrapped the elder Adventurer forcefully under his arm and led him away from the door.

“Hahah, sounds like the votes are four against one!”

Egon laid a soft look on his wife. The lady stood stern, still glaring at Reiram and seething with disdain.

“Samsara, lil robin, I don’t know what Reiram has done to you, but what I do know is that you two are friends… bad friends maybe, but y’know, friends all the same. I already promised that everyone could stay for as long as they like, and I’m not the kind

of man who goes back on his word. Please, would you reconsider?”

The icy steel on Samsara’s face melted a bit under the warmth of Egon’s smile.

“I… it’s just… you don’t understand…”

Miste gathered her courage to step up and reach out to the lady knight.

“Samsara, if not for Reiram’s sake, then would you do a favor for us?”

“Miste…”

“Everyone here… I’ve shared so many good times with everyone. I don’t… I really don’t want it to end yet… please…”

It was physically hard for Miste to keep meeting Samsara’s intense stare. Luckily though, the lady knight’s look slowly softened.

With a silent sigh, the excess ice and steel in Samsara’s expression crumbled away, leaving only the natural stoicism she always held. She turned for Reiram and threw her finger at him in commanding motion.

“You won’t be a guest, got that!? You shall pay for every single night you spend here!”

The elder Adventurer flashed a dry smile back at the lady.

“Fair enough, and your rate will be…?”

“Two thousand a night.”

Everyone in the room flinched upon hearing Samsara’s demand. The fare was ludicrous; even the finest hotels in the Capital didn’t charge that much.

Reiram walked up to Samsara, pulled a stack of money from within his coat and threw it on the table.

“Done, that’s for two nights in advance. I’ll decide later if I wish to stay longer.”

Samsara looked at the money in bafflement; she’d clearly been joking about the absurd fee.

“F–Fine! Enjoy your stay, and try to keep out of my sight as best as you can.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After tipping his hat in respect, Reiram left for the staircase. He turned to address Samsara once more before climbing up.

“Thanks for the hospitality. You have a lovely home, little Sammy.”

“Tch, I’ll charge you extra if you don’t disappear this instant…”

“Duly noted.”

Reiram left for the upper floors, leaving the bakery in a state of awkward silence.

Samsara sat down and returned to sampling her tea. Like the beverage, the mood of the room had turned a tad lukewarm. The lady turned to address everyone with a tepid smile.

“I apologize, that was less than dignified of me.”

Miste nudged closer and tapped Samsara timidly on the shoulder.

“It’s alright, I think everything is as it should be now.”

Egon leaned in to give her wife a peck on the cheek.

“Miste is right. Isn’t this so much nicer, a house full of life?”

Samsara gave Egon a glare as if saying; *We'll have a long discussion about this later, dear*. Egon returned the look with a smile expressing; *I'm sure we will, lil robin – I love you*.

With Samsara's glare eventually morphing into a dry smile, the incident came to a closure.

* * *

Miste, Zeriah, Dani and Ejrica spent a good while storytiming their travels between Powderberg and Magna Crux to Samsara, with all the twists and turns they'd encountered on the way. The lady knight was genuinely intrigued by their stories, and pleased that the group had ended up safely at the Capital.

Once the stew of woodland ox and mixed veggies – courtesy of Egon and Ejrica – was done simmering, the residents of the bakery, both old and new, settled for a shared supper. Egon was about to deliver Reiram's share to his bedroom, but Samsara ended up stopping her husband, telling him that if Reiram was forced to eat alone it would *spoil everyone's mood*. Samsara made sure to coat her words with a hefty dose of condescension.

The meal went without further outbursts from Samsara. Although she clearly was less than pleased about Reiram's presence, she held her peace valiantly.

The meat stew was perfectly cooked, the vegetables simply melted on the tongue, mixing together with the creamy and softly peppery zing of the dish. Egon's talent in the kitchen clearly wasn't limited to baking.

Dani chowed down the chowder with a healthy appetite, cleaning his plate to the very last crumb.

“Mmhmm… Delish! Ah, the feeling of caring hands chopping up the veggies, you can just taste the love!”

Dani peered at Ejrica with unhinged warmth gushing from his eyes.

“Eh…? Wh–What exactly are you staring at me for?”

“Compliments to the assistant chef!”

Egon gave Dani a sly eyeballing.

“Hahah, sorry to burst whatever fantasy you were conjuring up there, but it was actually *I* who chopped those.”

Dani leaned for the pot of stew at the middle of the table and filled his plate with another serving.

“Well, that’s what I said; *caring hands*.”

Ejrica watched Dani shovel his plate empty in record time.

“I… uhm… fried the meat…”

“Hehe, no wonder it had such strong and nuanced aroma to it. It was great! Thanks!”

Ejrica gave her lip a munch while twirling a loose lock of hair bashfully around her finger.

“I’m glad it turned out fine.”

Watching the duo go through their back ‘n’ forth made Egon burst into warm chuckle.

“Hahaha, I like your style, Dani. No mincing words with you, love it!”

* * *

By the time everyone had filled their bellies, the sun had already sunken far behind the rooftops of Sector #3, leaving the skies of Magna Crux with the hue of calming indigo.

The group was in the midst of cleaning up after the meal when the bakery's doorbell rang out. Izak strolled in with his cool-as-cucumber style, carrying his skateboard under his arm.

"Sup, I'm back! Any food left for me?"

The young boy suddenly snapped to straighten his posture upon realizing Samsara's presence in the bakery.

"M–Mom!?"

Izak took a single running step towards her mother, before screeching to an abrupt halt. The boy remained standing silently in the middle of the room, with his gaze dropping to the floor in embarrassment.

"Welcome back…"

Samsara came to meet her son. It was hard to point out exactly, but there was a certain sense of breeziness between the two.

"Hello, Izak. It's nice to be home… And it would have been even nicer if I'd found you hard at work studying."

A moment of silence – just long enough to turn uncomfortable – settled between the mother and son.

Eventually, Izak lifted his head to gaze at the stern lady in front of him.

"So… How was the world beyond the Capital? Did you smite some bad guys? Will you be staying long?"

Samsara's answer was punctuated by a weary sigh.

“I saw my mission through, that is all you need to know. As for me staying; I have a leave for two weeks, though that is naturally subject to change if I’m needed.”

“Then I guess that’s going to be the shortest two weeks anyone’s ever seen…”

Samsara ignored her son’s quip and laid an appraising look on him. The steel of a knight was one thing, for that had been permanently imprinted on Samsara’s face, but the weighty metal in her eyes when she addressed Izak was something else entirely.

“Would you like to share as to where exactly you have been loitering this late? On a school night no less.”

“Well, y’know… just out.”

Another weary sigh slithered between Samsara’s lips. This particular back ‘n’ forth seemed to be quite common.

“Fine, forget I asked. Just as long as you remember what happens if I find your grades dropping.”

“I know, mom…”

Although Izak’s stance portrayed a boy acting cool and carefree, there was some genuine regret in his voice. Samsara gave her son’s hair a soft ruffle and led the boy towards the kitchen.

“Go ask your dad, there’s still some food left from the supper.”

Izak nudged past Miste on his way to the kitchen. The girl was drawn to gander at the young boy with his gaze dragging along the floor.

So, that’s the kind of mother Samsara is, huh…

* * *

At late evening, Miste was heading for her and Zeriah's room on the third floor to turn in for the night. While climbing past the second floor, the girl noticed that one of the doors was left slightly ajar, with soft light seeping to the hallway. Moreover, a pleasant rustling resounded from the room, the sound of pages being turned, as if inviting Miste in particular to investigate.

The girl sneaked closer to the door and took a peek through the narrow gap. Izak was sitting on his bed, reading a book. The boy seemed deeply focused; his eyes scanned the rows of text with impressive speed.

With a knock on the doorframe, Miste opened the door wider.

"Hi, Izak."

The boy lifted his face from the book to glance at her.

"Oh, hi… It's *Miste*, right? You need something?"

"No, nothing in particular. I just saw you reading, and you seemed to be enjoying it. It got me curious."

"Okay…? Well, it's really nothing to twist your leggings over, just some basic algebra."

Izak slammed the book shut and extended his hand in presenting motion.

Following Izak's inviting gesture, Miste stepped inside the room. The boy's room was significantly smaller than most of the rooms in the former hotel. With a simple bed, work desk covered in stacks of paper, and a single bookcase filled to the brim with tomes, the room had quite a lot in common with the interior of Miste's own treehouse-nest back in Akrelion.

Miste took Izak's book and gave it a quick browse.

Wait, what the heck… ‘basic algebra’ my ass…

“This is a bit advanced for your age, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is. Your point?”

Cheeky runt… This is advanced even for me!!

“I guess your parents have nothing to worry, seeing as you’re already reading this far ahead.”

Izak responded with a disinterested shrug, though there was a slight smug smile twitching on his lips.

“My folks worry over everything – me doing this or that won’t change a thing.”

“That’s just how parents are sometimes.”

“Your folks worry over stupid shit too?”

“Well… uh… it’s mostly when I end up screwing up royally…”

“Right, that’s how they should be. Mine just constantly breathe down my neck, no matter what I do.”

“I don’t think it’s all that bad – you should have heard your dad today.”

“Huh, what about him?”

“Oh, nothing… he was just saying how proud he is of you, and how he thinks he couldn’t ask for a better son.”

Izak’s gaze snapped across the room, trying to avoid Miste’s smiling face.

“Tch, well, shows what he knows…”

Izak snatched the *basic algebra* back from Miste and resumed his studying.

When Miste had first heard that Samsara had a son, it was undeniable that she'd been intrigued to meet him. What kind of person would the child of a captain of the Knights be like? Paradoxically, Izak had turned out to be at the same time everything and nothing like Miste had imagined. The boy had his mother's ironclad shell, her confidence, and a striking lot of her looks, though at once being a buttload more abrasive than his mother, and with a sharp tongue to boot. All in all, Miste couldn't call Izak anything less than a fine kid; he was simply rough around the edges. In a way, the boy reminded Miste of herself when she was his age…

Miste eyed at the rows of books decorating the wall next to Izak's bed.

"Do you mind if I take a look, Izak?"

"It's a free country."

The boy didn't lift his gaze from his algebra.

While grumbling in her mind about how the runt was eerily reminding her of Reiram if anyone, Miste began scanning the books on offer more thoroughly.

The tomes ranged across various fields, many of them standard school-issued reading, while others fitted into the so-called *basic* category. There were also many storybooks and epics depicting ancient legends about astra. Many of the texts had copies sitting in Miste's own bookshelf back home as well, though she wasn't exactly sure whether she should feel pride or defeat over sharing similarities in book collections with an eleven-year-old…

"So, Miste, am I being redundant for noticing that you like books?"

“I love them! There’re so many secrets in the world, and to think that many of them are easily accessible like this by the hard work of others, it just makes my heart bounce with excitement!”

“Yeah… sure… why not…”

One particular similarity in the two bookworms’ collections lifted a triumphant smile on Miste’s face.

“Oh, you have a copy of *Tale as Old as Alchemy* too!”

“Huh? Yeah, what about it?”

“It’s my favorite book ever! *That* about it!”

“It’s a children’s book…”

“That it is, but I still think it’s way cool.”

“You are one odd apple, Miste.”

Miste paced confidently across the room and sat down next to Izak’s work desk.

“Hihi, but don’t you know; apples are the royalty of fruit!”

Izak lifted his gaze from his book to lay a flabbergasted glare at the eccentric girl. Finding nothing witty to say, the boy returned to his studying.

Miste let her gaze drift over Izak’s work desk. Among the scattered homework and other miscellaneous sheets of paper, one loosely rolled scroll caught Miste’s attention. The girl uncurled the piece of parchment against the desk. The beautiful cursive text was clearly written recently; the ink was barely dry.

“Hey, hey, hey! What are you– No!!”

Miste didn’t have time to read any of the text properly before Izak jumped over the desk and snatched the scroll for himself.

The boy rolled up the paper tightly and chucked it deep into the depth of his drawer.

“Didn’t your folks teach you any manners!?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“I’m not upset!!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you were upset when you weren’t upset.”

“I… uh… just… don’t touch anything on the desk, okay? The books are fair game, go nuts, but all this stuff here, this is mine, got it?”

“Sure, I understand.”

Whatever the scroll held within, it was of utmost importance to Izak, and apparently for his eyes alone. As someone who preferred to keep her unfinished projects a secret until the right moment for unveiling, Miste understood fully how Izak felt.

Hihihi… at least I got a genuine reaction out of him…

“Well, I guess I should stop bothering you and get going. Good night, Izak.”

Miste had already slipped out of the room before Izak responded to her.

“Wait, Miste!”

“Yes?”

“To be honest, it’s kinda weird to think that you guys are friends with my mom.”

“Hmm, and why is that?”

“I never realized that my mom had any friends… it’s… reassuring… or rather cool. So, I guess what I’m trying to say is that… you’re kinda cool, Miste.”

Miste sent Izak a wide smile, the warmth within her heart blossoming unabashed on her cheeks.

“Hihi, I think you’re kinda cool kid too, Izak.”

* * *

Zeriah was waiting for Miste in their room, lounging on the grand-sized bed that each of the luxurious rooms came equipped with.

“Huh… Oh, Miste… I was wondering where you’d ended up…”

Zeriah was already half asleep. Miste felt a bit guilty for making him stay up late waiting for her.

“Sorry, I had a little chat with Izak.”

“About what?”

“About all kinds of things, and then on the other hand not much about anything at all.”

“I see… so a basic case of bookish folk bonding… got it…”

Between soft yawns, Zeriah flashed a good-willed smirk at Miste. The girl returned the gesture in kind.

The day had been long and eventful, and the bed looked beyond comfy, Miste was sure she’d sleep like a log. Although, her good night’s sleep was always guaranteed by the closeness of Zeriah.

“So, Miste… on a scale of one to ten, how excited are you? We’re finally here in Magna Crux after all, and the trial is only two nights away.”

“Me? I’m a solid eleven! You?”

“Hmm… I’m hanging comfortably around the seven to eight range.”

“Oh? Is there anything I could do to help you get pumped to the max?”

Zeriah threw the bedcovers bare next to him.

“Well, you can start by joining me in bed.”

“Aww, did you miss me that much?”

“It gets lonely in a big city… scratch that, in a big world, without something reminding about the comforts of home.”

“Hihihi, well, I’m happy to oblige!”

Miste threw away her excess layers of clothing and crawled next to Zeriah. The boy threw his arm around Miste, and the couple curled up tightly within each other’s embrace.

Inside the calming darkness, cradled by their new fluffy resting place, and the warmth of a loved one, the realm of dreams approached fast on both Miste and Zeriah. Just before the two fell beyond the veil of wonder, Miste let out a content hum.

“Hmm? What’s on your mind, Miste?”

“I was just thinking that… with all that’s happened thus far… I think I’m going to like it here…”

VERSE #33: BEE HAPPY

In these past nineteen years that Ejrica had been blessed by the graces of the sun, her current travels were the first time she’d ever set foot outside the boarders of her home country,

Serestria. Together with her astral partner, Sakuya, the young warrior woman had crossed the entire Kingdom of Zirinia in search for a perfect training ground where she could temper her spirit. Such place awaited her at the heights of the Maryam Mountains, near the city of eternal winter, Powderberg.

For months, Ejrica had fought against the forces of nature: the freezing wind and ferocious beasts of the mountain range. In the end, her spirit and might had increased tenfold. Her abilities would no doubt be celebrated among her people.

However, before Ejrica was able to consider traveling back home, fate had stepped forth and presented her with something wholly unexpected; a new adventurous path to follow, filled with new friends, experiences and challenges.

Prior to meeting Dani and being introduced to his band of companions, Ejrica's travels had gone solely through the untouched wilderness, for the comforts of modern cities would surely not further her training. And yet, after joining her new friends on a journey that was full of warmth, companionship and laughter, and seeing a different side of Zirinian culture, a taste of the city-life, Ejrica had noticed a whole new kind of evolution within herself.

Due to her rigorous training since childhood, Ejrica's body and mind were those of a true warrior; unyielding, incased with iron. Now, amongst that unbending strength, Ejrica felt her heart filled with something else entirely; an unsettled beat, a jump of excitement, and a soft tingle when surrounded by caring people. And even though some might've considered these kinds of sensations as detriment to a warrior, in the end, Ejrica had found herself feeling more powerful than she could have ever imagined, for this sensation of happiness was something

she could harness to add to her strength. Her new friends depended on her, and Ejrica would rather see herself die before letting that trust be betrayed.

However, this sensation of comradery and happiness also came with some baggage. Recently, Ejrica's heart was often gripped by an unfathomable sense of dread, even over things one might consider quite minor…

* * *

It was early morning on the last day before the Adventurer trial. Ejrica was climbing down the steps from the third floor of *Sweet Whites Café & Bakery*.

The previous day had been taxing, filled with many new experiences, among them riding inside the Capital's central elevators, something that made Ejrica feel cripplingly anxious, which in turn was shameful for a Serestrian warrior like her. Even though she was indeed tired, and her new bed was quite comfortable, Ejrica had been unable to get much sleep; her internal clock had been firmly set in *early-bird-mode*.

The comforting aroma of oven-fresh bread floated from the kitchen and up the stairs. As was fitting for a baker, Egon was already up and about before the rest of the house.

A bit surprisingly, Ejrica also found Dani loitering at the café. It was rare, unheard of, for the boy to be up before her. Dani tended to be a rather heavy sleeper.

"Gooood Moooorning!! Another beautiful Zirinian morning we're having! And the weather outside is shaping up to be pretty nice too… hehe…"

"Good morning, Dani. You certainly seem to be in high spirits."

“Can you blame me? Awesome company, good grub, a soft bed… sprinkled with the occasional sighting of natural beauty… It is truly a dream life, I’m feeling like I don’t want to wake up at all, though here I am! Lucky me!”

Adding yet another person to the list of *earlier-birds* than Ejrica, Reiram strolled to the café from the kitchen. The elder Adventurer nodded a nonchalant greeting to Ejrica, before smacking Dani on the back of his head.

“Will you just keep it down?! Us being here is enough of a hassle as is, we don’t need you waking up half the block this early.”

“Yea… yea… sorry…”

Curiously, Reiram was carrying a paper bag filled with fresh loafs of bread. The man headed for the bakery’s entrance and creaked the door softly open, careful to make the doorbell ring out as gently as possible.

“Oh! Wait just a sec, Rei-Rei!”

“I swear, if you don’t shush your trap, I’ll shush it for you…”

“I was just thinking, since you’re heading for Sector #5, would you mind bringing some stuff for me? I promise to pay you back later.”

Dani walked up to Reiram with a stupid-wide grin on his face and slipped a note inside Reiram’s pocket.

“The hell do you take me for? Am I suddenly some sort of errand boy to everyone?”

“You were the one who said you didn’t want to hang out with us today. Come on, Rei-Rei, you can do this much for me.”

Reiram scanned Dani’s note briefly.

“These are from Felix’s place, right? Fine, I was planning to visit him anyway to restock on bullets.”

“Thanks Rei-Rei! You’re the man.”

“Ugh, whatever… Well, I’m going now. Try to keep out of trouble while I’m gone.”

“Huh? What kind of trouble would we be getting into?”

“That’s just the thing; I dare not even imagine…”

Reiram slipped out of the bakery and closed the door gently behind him.

Ejrica and Dani settled at the table nearest to the bakery’s counter for a shared breakfast. Dani broke a loaf of bread in half, releasing a cloud of warmth to dance between the duo, and offered Ejrica one of the halves.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

“Man, ain’t this awesome or what?! Goodies straight out of the oven, just for the two of us.”

“Yes, we should certainly be grateful. Though we should also show some courtesy, we don’t want to eat Egon into bankruptcy.”

“Hehehe, no worries, he said there’s plenty to go around.”

With the way that Dani beamed his boyish smile so sincerely over something so simple – a piece of bread with a dab of butter melting on top – Ejrica couldn’t help but smile with him. Something about Dani’s ceaseless energy and bouncy positivity felt irresistible, like honey to the bees, alluring like no other. This adorably earnest smile, a tiny sun that watched over her,

made Ejrica's heart dance. It was a special kind of happiness, one that she treasured deeply.

At the same time, Ejrica knew these kinds of feelings were dangerous, for if she'd let herself indulge them for too long, the passion within her would no doubt spiral out of control and lead her astray. Growing stronger as a warrior was Ejrica's purpose, a duty bestowed upon her, and deviating from that path simply would not do.

Dani was a dear friend, but that was all Ejrica could allow. Giving anything less than her full passion to someone would be an insult, more so to someone as special as Dani.

"Yoo-hoo… What's with the dozing off, Ejrica? Is something wrong?"

"Huh…? Ah! N–Not at all, everything is fine."

Dani's smile twisted into a playful smirk. Under the warmth of the boy's grin, Ejrica found her cheeks heating up and her heart slamming against her chest uncontrollably. She bit down on her lip to keep herself from screaming out from embarrassment.

Noooooo!! Why!!? I'm such an idiot! How long did I just stare at him!?

"You sure you're okay? You know, if there's anything on your mind, you can always tell me."

"Y–Yes, I know that. There's no need for worry. Like I said, everything is fine."

"I mean, if you're nervous about the Adventurer trial tomorrow, then that's perfectly normal – who wouldn't be? Though you shouldn't stress too much, I know you'll do awesome!"

“You… ah… you know me so well… that’s exactly what I was thinking… ehhehe…”

A mocking titter echoed through Ejrica’s mind, followed by Sakuya’s presence fluttering playfully within her soul, twirling and bathing in her essence. Ejrica’s warm feelings towards Dani never failed to attract the astra’s attention.

–Teehee, was that really what you were thinking just now? Hmm… I think I picked up something entirely different… It’s not nice to lie, y’know…

Shut it, Sakuya! Do not butt in!

–No need to get all flustered, I wasn’t about to. It’s just nice seeing you kids getting along.

I know exactly what you are thinking, and this will be the extent of ‘getting along’ between me and Dani, just so you know.

–Teehee, for now, good enough is good enough. I for one will savor each and every second of it.

Well, I certainly can’t stop you…

Ejrica left Sakuya to indulge herself within the warmth of her essence, and turned her attention back to Dani.

“So, uhm, where was Reiram going exactly?”

“Egon had a delivery to make at Sector #5 and Rei-Rei offered to take it in his stead. I guess he’s trying to help as much as he can, even though he’s the only one paying for his stay. Can’t say I blame him, if I were him I’d try my best to get on Sam-Yam’s good side too.”

“Samsara certainly seemed quite furious with him.”

“Well, the way I see it, it’s a huge improvement from last time. You should’ve seen them go at it; Sam-Yam kept beating the crap out of Rei-Rei till Big-Z stepped in to stop her.”

“I guess some things are hard to forgive fully.”

“Yeah, Rei-Rei certainly has screwed up royally in the past.”

Truthfully, with all she knew about Reiram and Samsara’s past, Ejrica couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of storm Samsara might carry inside her. Reiram’s lie was impossible to fathom.

“Um, Dani…?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s say that someone did something similar to you… deceived you, I mean… Do you think that you would be able to forgive that person?”

“Hmm… I honestly can’t say what I would do. I guess I… If I truly cared about that person, I’d at least try to move on and forgive them. Why do you ask?”

“No reason, just a thought…”

Dani leaned closer to Ejrica and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Don’t you worry, I’m sure Rei-Rei and Sam-Yam will work out their differences eventually.”

“Let’s hope for the best.”

With the mood turning a tad gloomy, Ejrica decided to quickly move the conversation elsewhere.

“So, what kind of shopping did you have Reiram do?”

“Oh, that. There’s this guy, Felix, who keeps a shop in Sector #5. Alax-tech, gadgets, hunting equipment, all top of the line and handcrafted. After all the adventures we’ve had lately, I’m running low on arrows and other equipment and I asked Reiram to pick up some for me.”

“That sounds like something Miste would like. You should take her to visit this Felix sometime, I’m sure she would get… um… *a kick out of it*? That’s the right colloquialism, right?”

“Yeah, that was spot on! I was actually thinking the same. I would’ve gone myself, but I got something else planned for today.”

“Hmm? What?”

A giddy spark flared in Dani’s eyes.

“There’s someone I’d like all you guys to meet…”

* * *

The entirety of the building was crafted out of beige stone, contrasting softly with the dark-brown frames around multiple enormous windows that dotted the frontside walls. Beyond the establishment’s tall fence, decorated with simple ornamentation, through a gate that was left invitingly open, a luscious garden of maple and oak and tulips of all colors greeted the visitors. The healthy growth of flora, along the U-shape of the building that curved to hug the small slice of serene nature, gave the place a thick feeling of secluded safety, like a cozy hiding place for some frail creature of the wild. Ejrica’s initial take on the place wasn’t that far off; after all, *The Silver Cloud Palace* was indeed a nursing home.

“Here we are! You guys wait outside, I’ll go chat with the reception and tell them who we are.”

Dani had been beaming with excitement the entire morning, and his bouncy strut while walking through the nursing home’s front door told his friends that his giddy spark wasn’t about to fizzle out anytime soon.

As was typical to her, Miste was fidgeting in anticipation and wondering out loud what kind of person Dani’s sister might be. Zeriah prompted Miste to contain herself; they’d find out soon enough.

To Ejrica, the sound of the couple’s banter had long since faded away, drowned underneath her own heart thumping loudly, thundering with alarm, while her thoughts raced with dangerous velocity.

It’s so sudden… I… I guess Dani did mentioned that he had a sister… but still… he could’ve given at least some kind of warning beforehand… What should I say…? How should I introduce myself…? I don’t want to seem too distant… but I certainly don’t want to seem too close either… What if I give the wrong impression… I… I… I don’t… Although… does it even matter…? Why am I getting all flustered…? She’s just Dani’s sister… I’m sure she’s a wonderful, warm, caring, strong, dependable and mellow person… just like Dani… No!! No, no, keep your head cool, damn it! …Uuh… what should I do…?

Dani returned a tad sooner than Ejrica would have liked – her time before the moment of truth was running out fast.

“Alrighty, I checked us in, we’re free to roll. Come on guys, I’ll lead the way.”

When it came to people living with carefree priorities, Dani was certainly in a league of his own. Although Dani had told Ejrica where they were going – to visit his sister on the far northern end of Sector #3 – he'd somehow *forgotten* to mention to her the teensy-tiny fact that his sister was living in a nursing home until they'd already arrived at the gates.

"Did I not mention it? Oh well, now you know. Shocking truths revealed, I know, hehe!"

All of this came with a big ol' smile on his face.

Two years ago, Dani's elder sister had fallen ill from a rare disease, dubbed *void bone syndrome*. Due to her condition, the structure of her bones had suddenly begun to deteriorate at an alarming rate, starting from her legs. Nowadays, she couldn't even stand on her own without her legs snapping like twigs. There was no known cure for the disease yet, but the spreading of the condition could be slowed down to a near perfect halt with medication. Because of the severity of the condition, Dani's sister was forced to spend her life under constant supervision and regular treatments. Such life didn't exactly come cheap, and as such, Dani had dedicated his time into making money as an Adventurer to pay for his sister's treatment. As for the two siblings' parents… they were not around anymore.

The residents of Silver Cloud Palace each had a private room, fully furnished and comfy, a far cry from the plain and purely efficient quarters typically seen in hospitals. The nursing home was striving to be exactly that, *a home*.

Dani's sister lived in the far end of the building's eastern wing. During the trek through the long, long hallway, with more space reserved for windows than the wall itself, filling the nursing

home with hopeful light and a beautiful vista to the garden outside, Ejrica had a bit more time to sort out her racing thoughts.

I never realized… the reason Dani is an Adventurer… it is all to make someone else happy… to keep her safe… Dani must love her sister so much… I can't even imagine how heavy such a burden must be to carry all alone… How… how is he able to just smile so easily… even with everything depending on him…? Where does he find all that strength… all that confidence…?

A drop of cold sweat slithered down Ejrica's neck like a tip of a knife brushing against her skin, agonizingly slow. With each step down the hallway, her heart got lost further and further beyond her control, slamming repeatedly against her chest like a caged chinchilla yearning for freedom.

What kind of person is Dani fighting for…?

Ejrica was ashamed to admit it, but until this very moment, when Dani's hand caught hold of the handle and pushed the door open to his sister's room, the hardened warrior from Serestria had never, in all the years she'd been blessed by the graces of the sun, been this afraid of anything.

This slithering, choking, pummeling anxiety was short lived however, for when the door was swung open, the essence of true tranquility washed over the group of visitors.

The young lady sitting on her bed, with locks like rivers of molten chocolate streaming over her shoulders, her eyes glistening like water from the purest of springs, subdued rose on her cheeks, lips full and juicy as strawberries, draped in a long and flowing dress of pure white, was like out of a painting. She radiated with calm and quiet mystery, and the motherly

warmth of a true goddess. The lady turned for the unexpected quartet at her door, and, like the way Ejrica had seen Dani do countless times, smiled with the exact same earnest glee. With her one simple gesture, there remained no doubt that she was truly Dani's sister.

A single tear cascaded down the young lady's cheek as she extended her hands towards the door.

"Dani…"

The boy ran – the two steps that it took – to his sister, and the pair coiled into a firm hug.

"Hi, sis, it's been long…"

"Three months, two days, thirteen hours and thirty-six minutes."

The pair loosened their embrace enough to get a look at each other's faces and shared a soft chuckle.

The way Dani's eyes locked with his sister was intense, it was rare to see such firmness in his gaze. Although his usual boyish glee was alive and present, the newly added protective feel in his smile was quite different. Ejrica had only once seen a similar look on Dani: the time that she and Dani had fallen into the lemmingshroo nest and Dani had promised her that he wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. Thinking about the connection between then and now, about the look Dani had reserved only to his sister, and to Ejrica, made a rush of warmth to surge through Ejrica's entire being.

Dani kept his right arm coiled around his sister's shoulders and turned to face the door.

“Don’t just stand there, come on in guys, she won’t eat you, at least I hope… you have been fed today, right?”

“Oh, ha-ha! You’re one to talk smack about my appetite, *Mr. I-once-munched-an-entire-birthday-cake-in-two-minutes-flat*.”

“Hey, I was a growing kid back then!”

“It wasn’t *your* birthday…”

“…ehhehe…”

Ejrica, Miste and Zeriah gathered around the two Clement siblings. The aura of warmth that radiated from the pair filled the room, and the visitors’ chests, with relaxed joy.

“Guys, this is my big sister, *Marlene Clement*. Her legs may not carry at the moment, but she makes up for it with her big heart, and formidable stomach.”

“Oh-ho-ho, you best be ready for my comeback, lil bro. I’ll be up and about one day, and you know the first thing I’m gonna do then? I’ll run, and I’ll run, and I’ll run, till I’ve built up a nice and ravenous appetite, and then I’m going to mop you in an eating contest. Better not take me lightly, oh-ho-ho!”

Marlene’s fair looks and the grace she carried herself with would easily suggest the lady being part of royalty, though at the same time, her quirky smile and honeyed laughter held the same easily approachable charm as her brother.

Miste was the first one to bounce forth and offer her hand in greeting.

“Hello, I’m Miste Gauntlett. It’s beyond awesome to get to meet Dani’s family. Your brother has been real sweet to all of us.”

Marlene took the offered hand with a pleased grin.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Miste. I hope lil bro hasn’t been too much trouble?”

“Not at all! In fact, he has been the one helping us out of trouble a bunch of times.”

Marlene gave her brother a snarky eyeballing.

“Hmm… Is that really so? I recall him being quite the trouble magnet.”

“Come on, sis…”

Zeriah stepped in to defend Dani from his sister’s poking.

“It’s true, Dani has come through for us multiple times. And… he has saved both our lives just as many times. I’m Zeriah Walz, pleased to meet you.”

Marlene laid a quick appraising look on Zeriah.

“My… I never knew Dani had built such bonds with people at the Guild.”

“Huh?!”

“You’re both Adventurers, aren’t you? Zeriah, Miste, I can sense the spirit of the Guild strong in both of you.”

Marlene peppered her words with an approving titter.

“Close, sis, but not quite. The trial is held tomorrow, and Mystic-M and Big-Z have traveled far from the north to take part in it.”

“I see, you certainly do fit the mold. I wish you both the best of luck.”

Marlene grasped both Miste and Zeriah by the hand.

“I can relax much more easy now, knowing my lil bro has people looking after him.”

“Come on, sis, you make it sound like I’m a child or something…”

“Oh-ho-ho, no reason to feel ashamed, I’m simply happy for you!”

The lady pulled Miste and Zeriah closer and into her embrace.

“Thank you for returning my brother safely back.”

“Of course! Anytime! Just leave it to us!”

“Haha, it’s been a good ride so far!”

After releasing her hold of the couple, Marlene turned to peer at Ejrica, who had remained withdrawn from the mingling so far. She tilted her head in an asking way and gave Ejrica a soft smile.

Even though Marlene had proven herself to be a kind and inviting soul, Ejrica was nervous to open her mouth. After already remaining distant from the conversation for so long, she felt embarrassed even existing in the same room as everyone else. She knew she was being rude – not even introducing herself properly – but the words just refused to come out.

“I… uh… I’m…”

A honey-glazed chuckle broke from Marlene’s lips. She gave her luscious hair a soft fluffing with her right hand, revealing a peculiar strand of hair that folded neatly over her forehead. Among her deliciously brown locks, one strand was colored bright-green, just like the one Dani had.

“It’s alright, just relax. Dani was speaking the truth; I won’t eat you.”

Marlene's smile gleamed like the sharpest rays of a rising sun. She truly was a spitting image of her younger brother.

Ejrica squeezed out every ounce of courage she had to speak.

This is ridiculous… I am a warrior of Serestria… Why am I acting like some pathetic rodent facing a cobra…?! Grrh! Come on, show some backbone!!

"I…"

Ejrica dropped into a deep bow, nearly hitting her head on the floor.

"MyNameIsEjricaNekaroAndI'mAFriendOfYourBrother'sAndI'veAlsoTraveledToYourCapitalSoThatICouldTakePartInTheAdventurerTrialYourBrotherHasBeenExtremelyKindToMeAndIsAWonderfulPersonAndIWouldBeVeryHonoredIfYou'dCallMeSimplyEjricaThoughIfYouDoNotWishToCallMeSimplyEjricaThenNekaroIsAlsoFineThankYouForHavingUsAndIAmSorryForBeingSoWeirdIHopeMyConductDoesn'tAffectTheWayYouViewMyPeople…"

"Whoa, whoa, hey, slow down, Ejrica!"

"R–Right! Sorry…"

Ejrica sprang back up to face Marlene. She tried to return the lady's warm smile in kind, but ended up with a stiff and awkward grin instead.

After witnessing Ejrica's embarrassing bumbling, Marlene broke into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh-ho-ho… my, my… oh-ho-ho… you have such wonderful friends, Dani…"

Once she had her fill of busting her gut, Marlene returned to her natural state of honeyed smiling.

“…Yes, quite wonderful indeed.”

From the corner of her eye, Marlene shot a sly look squarely at Ejrica, in a way that clearly got lost to everyone else but her.

Wait… what the heck was that about?! She’s not… thinking anything weird about me, is she…? Oh no, I messed up big time, didn’t I!!

Marlene leaned cozily against the body of pillows arranged at the back of her bed.

“Honestly, I can’t begin to tell how happy I am to see you again, Dani. I yearn to hear all about your adventures!”

“Oh, you will, no worries. On a side note of that… I got you something.”

Dani brought out a jar of pebble bee honey from his pocket and placed it on his sister’s nightstand.

“We stopped briefly at Pakel on our way to Capital. I thought you might enjoy a taste of nostalgia.”

Marlene jumped at the jar with giddiness in her eyes. She dipped her index finger into the honey and gave it a succulent lick.

“Mmmh… just like always…”

The lady took Dani by his hand and brought the boy closer for a soft peck on the cheek. The clear spring water that filled Marlene’s eyes wavered softly upon gazing at her brother.

“Thank you, you’re sweet for thinking about me.”

“Heh, of course, sis! I think about you all the time. You’re being silly for thinking I wouldn’t.”

“I guess I am…”

A subdued dash of red rose to Marlene’s cheeks. She gave everyone in the room a rueful look, seeming a bit embarrassed.

Suddenly, Dani snapped his fingers in a theatrical way.

“But hey, what are we sitting here for anyways, that’s not why we’re here!”

Dani dashed to a corner of the room, grabbed a wheelchair that was standing there, and rolled it next to Marlene’s bed.

“Huh? What are you up to?”

“We came to snatch you away!”

“What…?! But I… I have to be here for my treatment…”

“It’s all going to be alright, I already talked with the nurses about it, and they said that as long as I return you here by tomorrow there’s no problem.”

“Okay…? Where are we going?”

“Hehe, it’s not as much *where*, but as to *what*, and that is… To have fun!”

* * *

The gang returned to the Talmond residence with Marlene in tow. Dani acted as the chauffeur for the wheelchair-bound lady. Throughout the entire trek back, Dani kept reciting the gang’s adventures to his sister with boisterous glee. The air was filled with excitement, laughter and warmth, as new friendships were fast formed.

Marlene seemed to bond especially strongly with Miste, over their shared passion for the Guild of Adventurers.

As for Ejrica, she decided to remain mostly quiet, still embarrassed about her conduct earlier.

Once the chatting eventually turned to center around Marlene herself, and by extend Dani, Ejrica suddenly had a lot of new and unexpected things to think over. As it turned out, for a large part of the Clement siblings' life, Marlene had been much more to Dani than simply an older sister.

Years ago, Dani's family – his mother, father, and elder sister Marlene – had once lived in a grand villa which had belonged to the Clement family for generations, residing at the upper-class part of Magna Crux. His father was part of Hex Nova, a monster hunter, like his father before him, and his father before him. The trade went back in the family since times unrecorded.

When Dani was but a newly grown sprout, barely old enough to walk, his mother had one day left their family, all of a sudden. There had been no note, no warning, no explanation, she'd simply packed her things and disappeared. The father of the family was left to take care of his young daughter and little son all by himself.

Because their father was often away on missions for long stretches of time, Marlene was the closest thing to a guardian Dani had ever come to know, even though she herself was only five years older than her baby brother. By sticking together, the Clement family had managed to scrape by through the years, with the father providing for the children from afar,

and by the brother and sister duo relying on each other back home.

One day, when Dani had just turned thirteen, another tragedy struck the two siblings. Their father had fallen while on a mission, killed by beasts. Marlene was forced to step up as the sole provider for her brother. Luckily, she had inherited her father's impeccable skill with the bow, and had already received her own Adventurer license a year prior. The Clement family's legacy of monster hunters continued.

Marlene was a fierce and swift huntswoman. She worked tirelessly year after year, only stopping by back home to pick up another assignment from the guild. It was a taxing way of life, but she never complained. It was all for her little brother. No matter what fate decided to throw at Dani and Marlene, there always seemed to be a way to push forward.

That was, until Marlene fell ill…

Two years ago, Dani's elder sister had fallen victim to a rare disease, dubbed *void bone syndrome*. Due to her condition, the structure of her bones had suddenly begun to deteriorate at an alarming rate, starting from her legs. Nowadays, she couldn't even stand on her own without her legs snapping like twigs. There was no known cure for the disease yet, but the spreading of the condition could be slowed down to a near perfect halt with medication. Because of the severity of the condition, Dani's sister was forced to spend her life under constant supervision and regular treatments. Such life didn't exactly come cheap, and as such, Dani was forced to place the siblings' childhood home for sale and apply to become an Adventurer himself. For the past year, Dani's life had been dedicated entirely to the hunt; battling beasts to make enough

money so that his sister's treatment could continue. It was his turn to repay all the care he'd received over the years. It was now his turn to protect Marlene. These days, the Clement siblings' life was largely secure, if only for one payday at a time.

With so much of Dani's past revealed, Ejrica kept sinking deeper into her silent mulling.

Dani and Marlene have both gone through so much… I never expected anything like this… They are both strong… You're so strong, Dani… You've carried all of this with you all this time… Yet, you always jump in to help everyone with their woes, even at the cost of risking your own life… I'm honored to be your friend…

Though she kept silent, the warrior from Serestria felt her heart dancing ever fiercer, reaching desperately towards the boy with the kindest soul she knew. The constant thumping in her chest was loud enough that Ejrica feared others might hear it.

This beat inside her chest, this feeling of longing, it would not cease. Ever since meeting Dani, this feeling of being pulled closer and closer and closer had grown more unbearable each passing day. It scared Ejrica, though paradoxically, it also made her feel safe, which scared her even more…

* * *

The reception at *Sweet Whites Café & Bakery* was just as welcoming as the day before. Egon, Samsara and Reiram all got along with Marlene immediately. Reiram had been clearly harboring dread over meeting someone from Dani's family – admittedly, even one Clement was at times more than enough for him to tolerate – but as he realized that Marlene, even though holding a lot of her brother's happy-go-lucky tendencies,

was a person of far more dignified leanings and a true lady in the fullest sense of the word, Reiram's anxieties were swiftly put to rest.

Marlene was visibly humbled by the kindness shown to her. Other than her brother, she had no one who'd visit her at the nursing home. And though the activities Dani had planned for the day weren't anything grand or impressive – merely chatting over shared lunch – the gleeful smile on Marlene throughout it all was like on a kid on her birthday. She didn't say it outright, but it was clear as day on her face that merely spending time with people outside of the hospital was a party to her.

* * *

Later, once Izak had returned from school and the rush hour at the bakery was over, Egon closed his shop a bit early so that everyone could enjoy the rest of the evening together.

By Egon's suggestion, and backed by unanimous vote, the group decided to visit the bathhouse neighboring the bakery, called *The Soothing Pearl*. The gentleman in charge of the place, one Vince Bartok, was an old friend of Egon's. The two families had lived in Sector #3 for generations, with long traditions of running their businesses side by side. Being good pals with the Talmond family netted the group a considerable discount from Vince.

The bathhouse's outer shell was largely identical to any other shop or house on the street, with its creamy-white walls of stone covered in a growth of vine and tender flowers. The interior held a much more secluded and mysterious feel, created with an elegant mixture of dark browns and teal-colored tiling on the walls and the floor, red cloths curtaining the rooms and

separating them in place of doors, pillars made of swirling marble, and the slightest dimming of lights to put forth the perfect air for relaxing.

Unlike with Egon and his hotel-turned-bakery, Vince's establishment had seen only small ounces of renovating in the past few decades, retaining a charmingly simplistic and classical feel compared to many of his competitors. Most modern bathhouses in Zirinia, especially those in the Capital, were nowadays fitted with automated showers, soap dispensers, poolside bars, and a variety of pools, some filled with ice cold water, others connected to machines that would make the waters dance and bubble with massaging properties. Rather than changing with the times, *The Soothing Pearl* had placed its faith exactly in its traditional offerings; to create a calm cove for the local folk, and uphold a tight sense of community.

In an effort to rectify her bumbling and awkwardness thus far, Ejrica offered to help Marlene get ready for the bath. Miste and Samsara went on ahead, leaving Ejrica and Marlene amongst themselves in the dressing room.

"I'm sorry for being a bother, Ejrica."

"No, no… Not at all… We'll join the others in no time."

Due to the frailness of her legs, Marlene couldn't move as freely as most folks, and as such had some difficulty getting undressed on her own. Ejrica threw her own garment aside in a flash before moving to help Marlene with hers.

Throughout the operation, Marlene was the one clearly more at ease with the whole thing; she was used to being helped. As for Ejrica, she was nerve-wracked as ever, trying her damnedest to

be gentle with her hands, and not to touch anywhere weird. Each time the two ladies locked eyes, even for a passing fraction of a moment, Ejrica felt a sudden harsh kick right beneath her chest. The sensation was something she couldn't suppress, no matter how much she tried.

This is embarrassing… What's wrong with me?! Why does this have to be so hard… there's nothing special here… I mean she is Dani's sister, but… Graah! Who am I kidding… Marlene is all kinds of special!!! She means so much to Dani… I… I… I really want her to like me…

–Teehee, if she doesn't realize how awesome you are, then it's her loss, and her loss alone!

Sakuya… I don't… I… It's not that simple…

–Oh, will you just relax! Mulling and muttering over it isn't going to solve anything! Just be yourself and everything is going to be fine. In fact, everything is already fine!

Right… Thank you, Sakuya. I promise I'll try my best.

–Great! Oh, and just so you know, you've been rubbing her thigh for about a minute straight now… you should probably stop that…

Huh!!?

Ejrica had blanked out completely while anguishing over her emotions. She was currently kneeling right before Marlene, who sat stark naked on a small wooden bench with her gaze nailed on her daydreaming assistant, more precisely on Ejrica's hands that were firmly coiled around Marlene's left thigh.

A giggly smile rested on Marlene's lips.

"Everything alright?"

“Yes! All is fine, more than fine, perfect even! You… uh… have really soft skin…”

“Why thank you, what a nice thing to say!”

“I… uhm… I’m… going to let go now… sorry…”

“Oh-ho-ho, no need to rush, it felt quite nice actually. You have really strong hands, Ejrica.”

Marlene’s smile gained a touch of snark.

Hgunghyaaaaaa!!!!!! Noooo!!!!!! It’s over!! Now Marlene thinks I’m some kind of depraved feel-upper!!!

–Don’t lose faith, all is not lost yet.

Well, what the hell am I supposed to do now!?

–It’s like they say in Zirinia; ‘It’s better to go out with guns ablaze’!

Meaning!?

–Rub her legs some more, teehee!

I certainly will not!!!

Ejrica jumped to stand and hid her hands behind her back, as if concealing her fingers would undo their deeds. She dared not meet Marlene’s gaze.

“I’m sorry for being so weird all the time! I honestly don’t mean to, please forgive me!”

Ejrica was about to lower herself into a bow, but was stopped midway by Marlene’s hand grabbing her shoulder.

“Hey, hey, it’s alright, Ejrica. I don’t think you’re weird at all.”

“You… don’t?”

“Nuh-uh! In fact, I think you’re funny.”

“You… do? No one has ever called me funny before… well, at least no one whose family name doesn’t begin with a *C* and end with *lement*, that is…”

Marlene gave Ejrica an approving nod. The two ladies remained gazing at each other in silence, smiling with subdued glee. After a moment of prolonged quiet, Ejrica felt her heart beginning to bounce with increased tempo once more.

“So… uh… we seem to be ready to go…”

“It would seem like it.”

“And… I think it would be impractical to ride your wheelchair into the bath…”

“That would be inconvenient, yes.”

“Then I’ll… I’ll carry you, if that’s okay with you. I promise to be gentle.”

“I’ll leave myself in your care.”

Ejrica caught Marlene to rest in her arms and lifted her up softly.

Strangely, even though Marlene’s bare form couldn’t be called anything less than *luscious*, and even with the fact that – were she able to stand – she was a tad taller than Ejrica, Marlene was extremely light, unnervingly so. It felt as if a part of Marlene Clement was crafted out of formless ether, like a hollowed-out doll. The unexpected lightness of her cargo made Ejrica strengthen her grip slightly, fearing she might drop Marlene and make her crumble into little pieces of porcelain.

The short trip to the bath went without any trouble. The women’s side was at the moment void of visitors, except for

Miste and Samsara already neck deep in the water, soaking away their stresses with gusto.

“There you guys are, we were almost starting to get worried!”

“Oh-ho-ho, sorry to keep you waiting.”

Ejrica climbed down a set of shallow steps that led into the pool and under the warm waters, with Marlene in her arms. The water was perfect, just balmy enough to be called hot, tickling and needling one’s skin. It was like bathing in liquid rays of the sun. The air was scented with a touch of juicy sweetness wafting from the colorful flower petals that were sprinkled around the pool.

Ejrica felt Marlene twitch slightly as she got carried into the embrace of the cozy waters. Ejrica laid her to rest near the wall of the pool.

“Is this spot here fine?”

“Thank you, Ejrica. Right here is absolutely perfect.”

Marlene slid as low as she could, submerging all the way to her earlobes. A whisper of utter satisfaction broke softly from her lips.

“I could just melt right here…”

Miste nudged closer to the duo of late arrivals.

“I know, right? I feel like I never want to leave.”

“Except for the Adventurer trial tomorrow, I reckon.”

“Are you kidding?! I’d stroll to the Guild right now for the trial if I could!”

“Oh-ho-ho, that’s the spirit. After all, you can’t have a proper *adventure* without the spirit of an *Adventurer*.”

“No worries there, lemme tell ya, I got that to spare!”

“You certainly seem like the type who’s always full of energy.”

“You know it! I’m all pumped up and ready to show what I got! And once I’m done rinsing myself into a more presentable condition, and smell like roses, it’ll be the most totally awesome entrance ever! Wooh, I cannot wait!!”

Miste jumped to stand and thrust her right fist high towards the ceiling, lifting a large pillar of water to gush every which way in her wake. The girl sank slowly back under the waves, her cheeks beaming bright red.

“Hihi… I guess I need a few more moments to soak till I’m completely relaxed.”

Marlene leaned closer to Ejrica and gave her a teasing nudge on the shoulder.

“Oh, Ejrica can help you with that, she gives absolutely divine foot rubs.”

“!!!”

It was fascinating how one’s brain could suddenly star boiling from shame in a span of a single sentence, or at least it would have been fascinating to Ejrica, if she didn’t want to simply die right then and there!

“That’s not… I didn’t…”

“Ah, so that’s what was keeping you guys. You never told me you were a masseuse, Ejrica.”

“I’m not! I mean, I didn’t even really…”

Samsara aimed a soft snicker at the trio of girls.

“A good and thorough massage sounds beyond lovely, I’ll have one too, please.”

Miste and Marlene joined the lady knight in her good-willed grinning. As their smiling eventually escalated into full-on laughter, Ejrica felt herself getting hotter than the bathwater. She ducked down low and dived under the surface.

“Oh-ho-ho, I’m sorry, Ejrica, I just couldn’t resist! Please don’t hate me.”

Marlene fished Ejrica back to the surface by her shoulders. Though she couldn’t fight down her laughter just yet, she gave Ejrica a genuinely sorry look between her sniggers.

The sensation of warmth all around, with the sweet scent of flowers and the soft laughter of friends filling the air, was infectious – it took over Ejrica, and she broke out laughing with the others.

“Heheh… you guys better be careful what you wish for. My hands are trained for rough play, I won’t be responsible if you start second guessing once I start.”

“Oh, I don’t mind, bring it on! I may not be able to carry myself on these legs of mine, but I certainly can feel them. I swear, a couple of years without a proper stretch of leg and they get sore as all heck!”

“So, uhm… did you really want me to–”

“Maybe later. Right now, Ejrica, I simply want you to relax. I think we all deserve a bit of rest.”

Samsara stretched out wide and rested her arms over the edge of the pool.

“Absolutely agreed!”



The ladies took a moment to truly indulge themselves. The atmosphere, the company, the balm of the water, everything was utterly perfect. All anxieties, be they of muscle or mind, simply thawed away like snow cascading down a mountainside by the coming of spring.

Miste let out a soft hum while stretching herself to lay ever more relaxed.

“Hihi, this was a great idea. This is so nice… It’s like old times, right, Samsara?”

“It is, though I don’t think it’s been long enough since Powderberg to be considered *old times* quite yet.”

“Well, long enough for me to already miss this. Didn’t you?”

“Heheh… I certainly did, Miste.”

Marlene followed Miste’s example and sunk ever deeper into the relaxing bath.

“Aww, that’s awesome, do you guys do this often?”

Marlene turned her head slightly towards Ejrica, as if aiming the question squarely at her.

“Not exactly often, but…”

As Ejrica’s gaze wandered across the bath, her eyes ended up locking with Miste. The girl tilted her head in an asking way.

“…but I feel like I’d very much like to do this more often.”

“Yay! Thanks Ejrica. Love ya too!”

Marlene sighed out with a soft giggle.

“You guys are all such good friends. As an Adventurer myself, I can’t help but feel a bit excited for what’s to come. I bet you guys will end up making quite the splash at the Guild…”

* * *

“Cannonball!!”

Dani landed into the pool neatly between Zeriah and Reiram… well, *neatly* in the sense that he didn’t end up butt-tackling anyone on his way down, and *not-so-neatly* in the sense that the resulting splash towered high enough to reach the ceiling, creating an indoor-tsunami.

“Ooh… the water is nice and cozy warm–hmgpf!”

Just as Dani got back from his brief dive, Reiram grabbed the boy by the neck and slammed his face against the surface of the water.

“Just because *we* are the only ones here, doesn’t mean you ought to act like *you* are the only one here.”

“Blblblblb… Sorry, Rei-Rei…”

“We do have a proper eleven-year-old with us too, you know. You could at least try to act your age and…”

“Look out below!”

Another bomb from above landed next to the trio, creating a second miniature tidal wave. Izak surfaced a couple of seconds later at the other end of the pool.

“That was sweet! But I guess you don’t exactly need me to tell you that. Ain’t that right, Dani?”

“Awesome splash! A+, little dude! The extra plus is for not getting caught in the hands of Mr. Grumpypants over here– hmgpf!”

Reiram slammed Dani’s face against the water once more.

“I’m grumpy because you’re annoying!”

“Whoa, easy on the slamming and dunking there, Reiram. You might end up giving Dani brain damage or something…”

“Honestly, Zeriah, how much real damage could I possibly do?”

“Now, now, boys, let’s all play nice.”

Egon paced down into the bath by the shallow steps carved to the side of the pool. The man settled down while leaving just enough room between him and Reiram so that both of them could rest relaxed with their shoulders spread wide.

“In addition to the rambunctious rascals, let’s not forget that we’re also in the watching presence of a certain fiery-tempered lady knight. We don’t want to end up…”

Beyond the main wall that split the men’s and women’s baths apart, a muffled voice resounded out with fire and temper.

“Keep it down over there!! That goes double for you, Izak! Don’t make me come out there, you know I will!”

“…end up bringing the wrath of my dear lil robin upon us all. Let’s just relax and enjoy ourselves, okay?”

Egon laid a short jabbing glance at his son. Izak dropped nose deep into the water while muttering out something along the lines of *whatever*.

Repeated blows to the head from Reiram aside, Dani wouldn’t have changed a single thing from the moment he was living right then and there. Life in itself came with a lot of pleasant and awesome things, but rarely did they come together in such a succulent and heartwarming combination as with the passing days.

This is truly the high life… got some food… got a nice roof… a warm and cozy pool… great friends… some occasional woes, sure… but also great friends helping out with said occasional woes… a big sister who is safe and isn’t going anywhere… Yep, a guy couldn’t ask for more…

The warm waters of the bath were soothing enough that Dani ended up dozing off amidst his relaxed pondering. Next thing he knew, he found himself leaning against something soft yet firm, something that kept wriggling underneath his cheek.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Hunh…?”

Dani was drooping against Reiram’s shoulder.

“Whoa! Sorry, Rei-Rei, didn’t mean to get all physical on you. You know how it is; a warm bath right after a meal… hehe…”

“…”

“Um… I’ll be moving away now.”

“You do that.”

“Hmm… Wait a minute… Wow, holy smokes!”

“What the blazes! Hey!! Where do you think you’re touching!?”

“Yo, Big-Z, feel these out! Now here’s something to set your goalposts on… Check out Rei-Rei’s abs! Man, how long did it take to build these babies up? I mean, these abs have their own abs, that’s the level we’re talking about!”

“What?! Dude, I’m not interested in that?!”

“Oh, believe me, I wouldn’t normally be either, but these are something else entirely. Jeez, you could grate cheese with these!”

“I’m going to give you exactly two seconds to get your hands the hell away from me before I’ll break your spine…!”

It took Dani only one second.

“Okay, it’s all clear, it’s all cool… but really, Rei-Rei, those things are brutal… hmmm… something in your look tells me that I should be *shutting the heck up*…”

“I did promise to break your spine, didn’t I?”

“Point taken.”

As everyone’s amused eyes centered on Reiram, the man was left squirming in place and rubbing his temple in annoyance.

“Honestly, Dani… How is it possible that your sister is such a refined young woman, meanwhile you’re just… well, *you*.”

“Hmm… well, I know that big sis resembles dad way more than I do, so I guess I get my tendencies from my mom? If you wanna know for sure, you have to ask her.”

If this had come from anyone else but Dani, one could be mistaken to think that he was being sarcastic. With Dani however, it was clear as day that he meant nothing more than what he’d said, there was no added malice. After all, each of his words were true.

Reiram gave Dani an assessing look, punctuated with a grunt.

“You have a lot hanging upon you.”

“I guess so.”

“Your sister has a great deal of faith in you.”

“I know.”

“You do realize that without you she’d have no one else to turn to?”

“I am aware of that, yes.”

“Then maybe you should consider at least trying to keep yourself alive instead of getting yourself caught up in all sorts of stupid shit all the time.”

“I love it when you care, Rei-Rei.”

“I do not care. It’s just annoying to watch idiots acting like idiots.”

“Well, that’s one way to define caring. Listen, Rei-Rei, it’s all good. I know what I’m doing, I got my own style of handling things. And actually… I thank my big sis for that.”

Dani leaned against the pool’s edging and turned his gaze towards the ceiling. The soft aroma from the flower petals

scattered across the bath invited the boy for a trip down memory lane.

“It’s kinda funny, these are the exact flowers that used to grow on the front yard of our house. *Striped orchids*, they produce a nectar that’s irresistible to the bees. Big sis says they were mom’s favorite…”

Dani burst out with a small chortle.

“Heh, I actually don’t remember anything about mom, I mean, I’ve seen pictures of her, but I don’t remember *her*. And though dad was around longer, it’s not like I have a firm image of what he was truly like either, it’s more like bits and pieces, flashes from my past… Big sis was the only constant in my life. I felt safe, it was like nothing bad could ever happen as long as sis was there. I remember her always telling me that I had a great smile, so I kept on smiling, even during all the rough times. She always seemed happy when I smiled.”

Dani turned for Zeriah with a somber look.

“You get what I’m talking about, right, Big-Z?”

“Yeah, I know…”

“Then… once sis got sick… I… uh… well, I didn’t exactly take it all that well… I was pissed, like royally pissed. I hated the world for taking everything away from me, one person at a time…”

As unsavory memories flooded Dani’s mind, the disgusting flavor of them made him grit his teeth in revolt.

“My memories of training to become an Adventurer, the trial, and me passing the trial… it’s all one rage-filled blur… I swore to keep big sis safe, but I did it with the taste of blood in my mouth… I lusted for revenge, even though there was no one to

take vengeance upon, but it didn't matter… I craved death, I wanted to destroy… I had become someone else, and I didn't even realize it myself…"

Amidst the bad-tasting memories, one that was eternally appetizing eventually pushed forth.

"I was about to leave for my first proper mission and was saying goodbye to sis. I was still all peeved and grumping about. We got into an argument and I managed to make a perfect ass of myself, saying stuff like *There's no reason to smile* and *Everything gets eventually taken away, so why even try*. Big sis ended up giving me the biggest lecture of my life, I tell ya, she can get pretty scary when she feels like it, even lying on her back. *Do you think father or I ever gave up believing?* and *If you are to save me by becoming someone other than my smiling little brother, then I might as well die now!*, that's what she said to me. It really shook me. Seeing sis sad and angry because of me made me realize that I'd been all wrong. That's when I decided to always be *me*, and not sweat too much about the future, no matter what!"

Dani aimed a shared grin at both Zeriah and Reiram, offering them fists to bump each.

"I'm not sure if I've ever said this proper but… You guys, all of you, make it really easy for me to keep believing, and to be myself, y'know. Thanks for always having my back!"

Zeriah tackled Dani's knuckles with gusto.

"Haha, anytime Dani!"

"Thanks Big-Z! You're a true bro!"

Dani threw his arm around Zeriah's neck and pulled him in for a loose hug.

“Rei-Rei? You want in on this?”

“I think I’ve already had my share of physical comradery for one night. Anyway, you’re welcome, or whatever. I just hope that permanent grin of yours isn’t going to get you killed someday.”

“We never know, but until then, I’ll just take it easy and keep on grinning, hehe!”

Izak splashed a jet of water across the pool while blowing out a dismissive snigger.

“Bah, enough with the huggzy-feely crap! If I wanted to sit around listening to folks yap about their feelings, I’d go bathe at the girls’ side.”

“Come, come, Izak, that’s not fair. You could try learning something from Dani’s story.”

“Sorry dad, I was half asleep for the better part of it.”

“Izak please… at least show some effort to act courteous.”

Dani rubbed his neck awkwardly.

“Hehe, it’s alright. I guess I babbled longer than I intended… I was already finished anyways.”

Izak leaned over the pool’s edging in boredom.

“Tch, at least there would be some entertainment on the girls’ side…”

A soft laughter echoed through the room, swirling around the pool along a cloud of crystalline dust. The cloud settled close to Izak, with Freyja’s projection appearing from within. The lady astra lowered to rest on the edge of the pool and gave the boy next to her a flirty smirk.

“What’s this I hear, craving for some womanly company, are we? I’m happy to provide.”

Freyja sent a pronouncedly succulent flying kiss to Izak. The boy froze in place, while his face exploded bright red. After a moment of fidgeting and mumbling something incoherent, Izak dove under the surface.

“Hmm… What’s the matter, *boy*? Weren’t you hoping for someone gorgeous to rest your eyes at?”

Freyja remained in waiting till Izak eventually returned to the surface.

“Well…?”

“Wh–What the hell do you think you’re doing, lady?! Th–this is the men’s bath! Yo, Reiram, call your astral apparition the hell away from me!”

Reiram threw a disinterested glare at the scene.

“Sorry, Izak, it doesn’t work like that. And besides, it wouldn’t change a thing. Freyja goes where I go, and she’s been here the whole time.”

“Th–The whole time…?”

Freyja giggled ethereally.

“Aww, there’s no need to be shy with me, Izak dear. Even with all the fetching gentlemen present, you’re quite the healthy young boy yourself…”

“Graah!! Get away from me!”

Izak coiled up to cover himself and pressed tightly against the wall of the pool, bright red as a boiled lobster.

Freyja sent a playful look at the rest of the guys. Her winking smirk resonated with everyone, leaving them all with smiles of their own.

“Thee-he-he, I hope you fellows don’t mind me as much.”

Egon loosened his shoulders and rested his arms over the pool’s edge with poise.

“Hahah, all fine by me! There’s no harm in adding a bit of beauty to one’s life.”

Dani rose to stand in the bath and slammed his right foot against the pool’s edge with splashing bravado.

“Right on!! A man should have nothing to hide! Come and feast your eyes one an’ all, for Dani Clement ain’t afraid to let his manly energy shine, hahaha!”

Zeriah was forced to lean back to dodge Dani’s manly energy…

“Dani, a bit of space would be nice! Your junk is hanging really close to my face!”



* * *

Come late evening, a soft wind had gathered to brush through the streets of Sector #3. As Ejrica stepped outside the bakery and into the cool night air, even the subtle summer breeze felt intense against her skin. The hot bath from earlier had left her feeling newborn.

Marlene was sitting in her wheelchair by the bakery's door.

"Oh, Ejrica, what's up?"

Ejrica handed Marlene a small paper pouch with an extravagant orange bow.

"Here, Egon wanted you to have some treats to go."

"Aw, thank you! Everyone's already been so nice to me – a bit more sweetness and I'm afraid I'll turn into a chocolate-lollipop myself, oh-ho-ho!"

The wind caught Marlene's hair to whip and float like a river of rich cocoa. The lone odd lock of green hair, similar to the one her brother had, kept twitching over her forehead. It was like it had a mind of its own, dancing and twirling apart from the rest.

"Dani said he'll be ready shortly."

"Hmm, I don't mind waiting. After all, you're here with me."

"Thank you."

Marlene let her gaze drift towards the skies, amongst the belt of stars above, her own smile shining just as bright. Ejrica joined the stargazing. An unknown time passed in silence while the two ladies basked under the soft touch of summer wind.

A long sigh from Marlene broke the quiet.

"I can't wait to get off this chair and walk again on my own two feet."

"Are the doctors getting close to a cure?"

"Nope, not yet, but I hear they are working on it."

"I'm glad you're not losing hope. You're strong, Marlene."

"There's still far too much I want to do for me to give up."

"Something you want to do?"

"I still have my Adventurer's emblem, it's waiting for me in the drawer of my nightstand, waiting for me to get up and walk. I dream I can one day go on an adventure with my lil bro and… all my new friends too."

"That sounds nice. I hope that day comes soon."

Marlene tried reaching for Ejrica's hand, but she stood a tad too far. Ejrica took a step closer and offered her hand for the lady. Marlene's grip was strong, the grip of an archer.

"Would you consider doing me a favor, Ejrica?"

"Of course, anything!"

"Please, take care of Dani for me."

"!!!"

"Sorry for being so blunt, it's just that… I've seen the way he looks at you. I can tell you mean a lot to him."

Ejrica's heart hammered so hard she couldn't fully hear her own thoughts.

"Dani… means a lot to me too…"

"I used to be so afraid for him. Every time he'd leave on a mission, I cursed myself for being like this. He's everything I have left, I love him more than anything. When you guys came walking into my room with him today, my heart stopped for a moment, because I was so happy. I was so relieved to know he has people to depend on."

Marlene's grip tightened around Ejrica's hand.

"You must have your own goals as an Adventurer, but I hope you'll still continue watching over my lil bro."

"I… I will! You can count on me. And once you regain your health, we'll all go on an Adventure together."

"Ejrica… Thank you… Thank you so much."

Marlene pulled Ejrica close for a hug.

"Marlene? Are you cold? You're shaking."

“Oh-ho-ho, I’m fine, I’m just so happy.”

Just then, the bell above the bakery’s door chimed out.

“Hey, what’s this here? Well, if it ain’t both of my favorite ladies bundled up into a nice and cozy roll. What were you girls talking about just now?”

“Oh, not much, just some girl-stuff, right Ejrica?”

“Y–Yeah, that’s it… just two girls, talking about stuff… hence *girl-stuff*… quite self-explanatory… ehhehe…”

“Works for me! Ready to go, sis?”

“All done! Bye Ejrica, thanks for everything. Tell everyone that they are absolutely wonderful, and I hope to see you guys again real soon. Good luck for the trial, I’ll be rooting for you.”

“Thank you, it has been an honor.”

Ejrica sent Dani and Marlene off with a bow. She remained at the bakery’s door and waved at the duo until they disappeared past the street corner. After everything that had happened that day, Ejrica felt like the dance of joy within her heart had intensified tenfold, but also, the sense of dread had grown along with it.

–That was a bold promise, Ejrica. An oath like that shouldn’t be taken lightly.

I know, Sakuya. It’s alright though, my aspirations won’t prevent me from fulfilling my promise.

–I hope you know what you’re doing.

All I need to do is grow stronger, and that’s exactly what we’re here to do. If I can just reach my goal, then I won’t only be able to protect Dani… I’ll be able to protect everyone…!

VERSE #34: ADVENTURERS' GATHERING

Zeriah was slowly nudged awake from his snoozing as the bed grew gradually cooler.

He had a hazy memory from earlier that morning – early enough that it could only barely be called morning – of Miste climbing out of the couple's shared bed and saying she couldn't sleep from excitement. Zeriah had replied with a nodding mumble and promptly lulled back to sleep himself.

Zeriah crawled out of the bed, shivering and still half asleep, threw on his clothes, and marched to the hallway.

While walking down the steps from the third floor of the former-hotel-now-turned-bakery, a tiny draft of humid wind brushed against Zeriah. On the second floor, at the end of the hallway, a door leading for a small balcony was left wide open. Samsara was standing by the balcony's railing, enjoying a cup of tea. Something had caught the lady knight's interest just below her perch; the slight curl on her lips spoke of approving zest.

"Morning Samsara. What are you eyeing at?"

"Good morning, Zeriah. See for yourself."

The view from the balcony opened down to a small garden behind the building. Surrounded by tulips growing in miscellaneous colors, Miste and Ejrica were busy with their martial arts training.

After mastering most of Ejrica's basic lessons back in Jotel, the Serestrian warrior had moved a great part of Miste's training to focus on mock combat between the two.

The current exchange of strikes was largely one sided; Miste was doing her hardest to land a single hit on Ejrica while she kept swaying away and blocking with little to no effort. After missing a punch and leaving herself badly exposed, Miste received a rude wake-up from Ejrica as the exotic lady's foot drilled against the girl's stomach. Miste was sent flying on her back, though she quickly climbed back on her feet.

"Come on, Miste, I know you can do better than that! Let's go again!"

Miste's answer was a fierce nodding grunt. She charged at Ejrica once more and the two continued their duel.

Samsara's pleased humming between her sips of tea mirrored Zeriah's own feelings perfectly; Miste's growth under Ejrica's tutelage had been impressive, and she was still getting better each day.

Spectating Miste's hard work, and thinking about the warm feeling that it gave him, made Zeriah think how much Miste must have been enjoying watching him and Kai practice swordplay all those years ago. It certainly held an encouraging allure.

"I guess training is the only thing keeping Miste composed while she waits. She's been getting more jittery each day, I'm a bit worried that by the time we get to Hex Nova she won't be able to control herself and will simply implode on the spot."

"Hmhmhm, and what about you, Zeriah? Aren't you excited?"

"Not so much excited as I'm nervous…"

"You both will do fine. I have no doubts about it."

"Yeah…"

Even with his own noticeable growth as a swordsman since starting his journey, there were still things pressing Zeriah's mind before the approaching Adventurer trial.

"Samsara… there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes?"

"There hasn't been a good moment to say this, but… I really appreciate all that you've done to us, and I don't just mean about letting us freeload in your home."

"You're all very welcome. What's this really about?"

"I've been doing a lot of thinking. I wanted to apologize for how I acted back in Powderberg. I wasn't ready for… well, pretty much anything really. You wanted to protect us, and yet I threw myself in harm's way, and even though everything worked out for the best that time, I…"

Samsara looked at Zeriah with her usual sternness. She was waiting calmly for Zeriah to say all that he had to say.

"…I'm sure that Kai would be disappointed in me if I'd gotten myself killed with my own stupidity… I guess what I'm trying to say is that I was wrong, and you were right. I'm sorry, Samsara."

The lady knight shook her head while chuckling softly.

"All is forgiven. I can see you've grown quite a lot since then."

"I guess I have. To be honest, I was really scared to admit my shortcomings a while back. I felt like I'd be letting Miste down if I ever backed down from a fight. But now I see that all Miste wants is for us to be together forever, and to have a life filled with adventures. To make Miste's dream into reality, I have to make sure that I'm there for her, safe and sound."

Samsara gave Zeriah a similar approving smile as when watching the two girls training in the garden.

“I’m sure you won’t only be doing fine in the trial, but pass with flying colors.”

“Thanks, Samsara. I just wish there was something I could do to pay back all the guidance and support I’ve been given.”

“Well, as for me, if you really want to do something, there is one thing that would please me to no end…”

“What is it? I’ll do anything!”

“Promise me you’ll stay true to your pure spirit and don’t become like Reiram.”

“I… uh… sure…? That was a joke, right?”

“Take it as you wish.”

Samsara threw Zeriah a crafty smirk before returning to savoring her tea.

* * *

The time was nigh to satisfy all excitement, to swallow all doubt, and to push skills to their limit – even with the potent danger of a certain eccentric girl imploding from glee. The Adventurer trial would be held today!

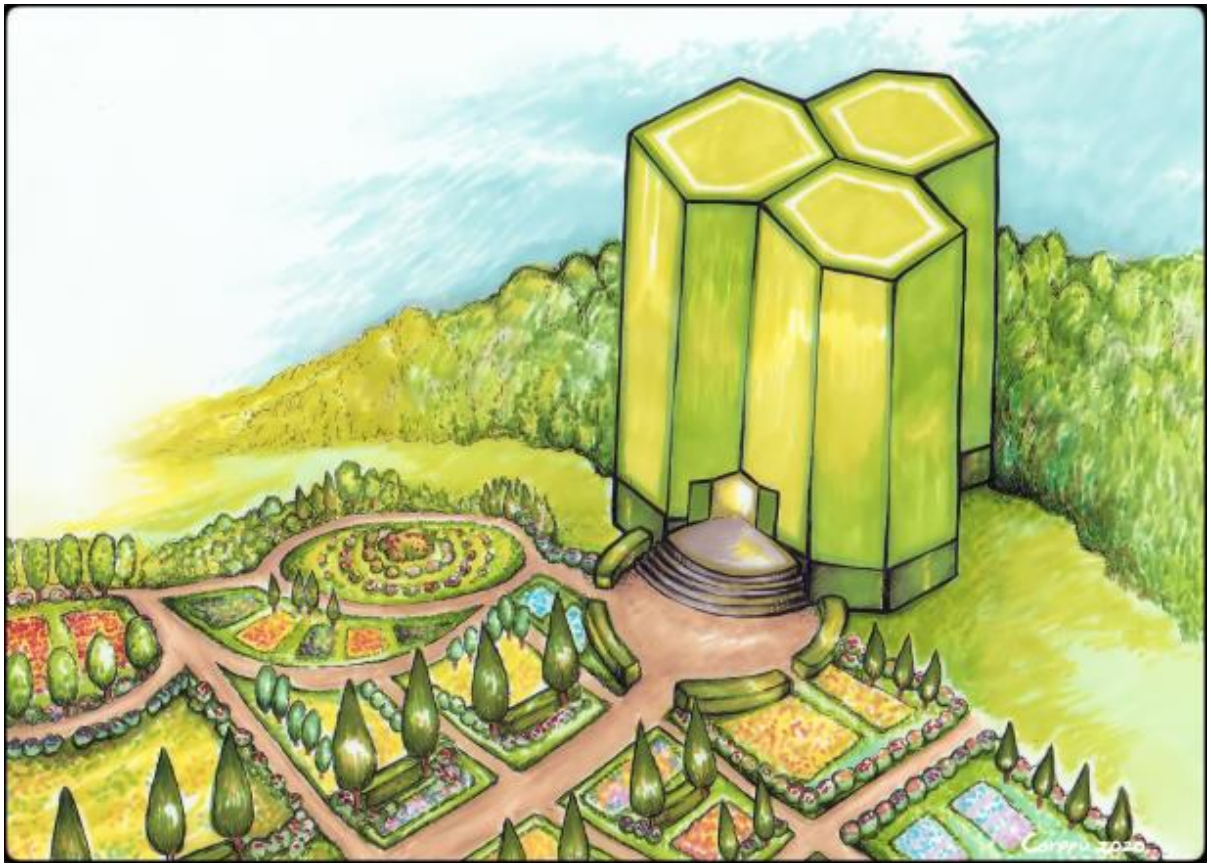
Miste, Zeriah, Ejrica, Dani and Reiram headed towards the headquarters of Hex Nova as a single unit. Seniors and newbies, teachers and students, all friends, soon to be eternally-bound comrades under one banner, an emblem that represented freedom and desire, a life of adventure, beyond any limits, with the word *impossible* to be erased from one’s vocabulary.

The gang made their way from the Talmond residence and for the main street of Sector #3. Following the grand boulevard would see them straight at the Guild of Adventurers, which resided at the far end of the road.

The mood among the group was filled with silent electricity the entire walk through. This static was broken by a triumphant shriek and a bubbling laugh of joy the moment Miste got the Guild's headquarters in her sights – though gladly, she managed to not implode on the spot.

The grand boulevard of Sector #3 led to an area of about a hectare in size, with sprawling paths slicing through large patches of carefully tended grass, dotted by beds of luscious flowers of nightly-violet and blazing-red and rows of trees with crowns cut in artful shapes. Middle of the striking garden, multiple paths converged at a large plaza, carefully crafted as hexagonal in shape. As a centerpiece to the area, there stood a grandiose fountain of abstract swirling shapes, like a humongous bonfire forged out of metal, casting several spouts of water towards the skies in place of smoke.

Beyond the garden, standing on the very farthest edge of Sector #3, the headquarters of Hex Nova loomed as mighty and impressive as was fitting for the Guild of Adventurers. The building was comprised of three large pillars carved out of lustrous jade, climbing towards the heavens closely linked together. Each of the pillars were molded in the shape of hexagonal prisms, so that the building would form the image of the Guild's tri-hex symbol from bird's-eye view.



Miste dashed ahead of her companions while shouting something incoherent with exploding glee. The rest of the group caught up to the girl after she stopped to admire the extravagant fountain in the middle of the garden.

“Whoooooow… Whow! Whow! Whow! Whow! I… can’t… believe… we’re… actually… here!!”

Miste was wiping something from her eye by the time Zeriah reached her and dropped his hand to rest on her shoulder.

“Have faith in your eyes. We are truly here.”

Miste cradled Zeriah’s hand inside her own.

“I’m… so happy…”

Suddenly, Miste spun around and grabbed Zeriah to twirl with her while she laughed the most sincerest of giggles. A blazing

red beamed on Miste's cheeks as she threw herself inside Zeriah's embrace and squeezed him with all her might.

"Miste…?"

"Gaah! *Happy* doesn't even come close to explain how I feel!"

Miste kept hugging Zeriah with ever-increasing vigor.

"Huggzy-squeezey!! Sorry Zeri, I just need to relieve my excitement, otherwise I feel like I'm going to break!"

"Haha, it's alright, bring out all the zeal you have, I can take it!"

Reiram walked past the couple while shooting a snarky look at them from under the shade of his hat.

"For crying out loud… It's your first day at the Guild, you could at least try not to embarrass us all right away."

Dani gave the elder Adventurer a playful nudge on the shoulder.

"Come on, Rei-Rei, who's going to be embarrassed by whom? There's no one here."

Truly, the front of the Guild was almost eerily quiet. There were only a few people strutting through the garden. The trio of newbies – Miste, Zeriah and Ejrica – scanned around the serene garden, all equally surprised.

"It is quite empty."

"Yeah, I was honestly expecting a bit more of a crowd."

"Maybe everyone is inside the building?"

Reiram shook his head dismissively.

"You three didn't think that Adventurers simply loiter around the Guild all the time, now did you? There are scarce few

members present at any given time. Most of us are out there somewhere on missions."

Miste kept gazing around in ponder.

"Makes sense… but… shouldn't there still be more people present today, y'know, other people who want to take the trial besides us?"

"Mary-Ann wasn't kidding when she said that the turnout hasn't been all that great in recent years. I wouldn't be surprised if you three were the only ones this year."

"Huh!? No way! Why would someone *not* want to be an Adventurer? It's like the coolest thing ever!"

"Honestly, Miste… I thought you of all people would understand. Being an Adventurer isn't just fun and games. Many times it's a thankless job, extremely dangerous and taxing. Not many people are willing to do the things we do."

"Hmm… I guess so…"

Dani patted Miste on the back with encouragement.

"Heheh, but Mystic-M here isn't just anyone! With all that energy of hers, she's clearly build for this. You should be proud of yourself, cos you'll soon be part of quite the special club."

"Thanks Dani, I'll give it my very best!"

Reiram cleared his throat in a calling manner.

"Shall we then? The gathering for new candidates will be held inside."

The group headed towards the mighty building a bit further from the fountain plaza.

Near the entrance of the building, a man was standing by the edge of the path, eyeing at a close-by tree. His hair swerved and spiked in thick patterns, like a crown of thorns resting atop his head. He leaned against a pair of mighty gardening scissors, imposing and sharp, resembling two broadswords slapped together.

Dani called out to the man with a peppy holler.

“Hey, Linden! How’s it going?”

The man gave no answer, instead keeping his gaze firmly aimed at the tree and its decoratively cut crown.

“Hellooo!? Everything alright?”

The man snapped his neck and jabbed Dani with an irritated glare.

“I can hear you, no need to shout.”

He focused back on his gazing. After a prolonged moment, the man yanked his scissors out of the ground and dashed towards the tree. With a powerful leap, the man reached the topmost leaves of the tree. He gave the crown a couple of sharp snaps with his scissors before dropping back to ground. He walked back to his previous spot to gander at the tree once more. His sharp nod was peppered with slight smugness on his lips.

“Absolutely perfect.”

The man turned to face the group properly.

“Good afternoon, Dani. And to you as well, Reiram. Honestly, you should know better than to bother an artist in the middle of creative process.”

“Yeah, sorry… I tend to forget sometimes.”

“Well, no matter, for no force on this planet can keep me from my duty. A living thing needs constant care so that it can look its best. Ah… it is a grueling task indeed, but the prize in the end is well worth it. Living art is something beyond compare, don’t you think?”

Before anyone could answer, the man kept on speaking.

“My, but what do we have here, haven’t seen you folks before. Fresh blood to the Guild, I presume.”

The man walked to meet the group and dropped his mighty scissors to clink against the marble path. As he leaned against his instrument, the group could see the tri-hex symbol of Hex Nova gleaming on his chest underneath his open jacket.

“Welcome all, I’m Linden Dawnthorn, Adventurer extraordinaire, and a great admirer of all things alive and beautiful in this world.”

Dani took the honors of introducing his friends.

“These guys have traveled far to ace the trial and join the cool-kids-club, hehe! Guys, Linden here may not look like it, but he’s quite the tough dude, and he takes his tree-business very, very seriously, so do yourselves a favor and don’t mess with his shrubs.”

“I wasn’t asked to do what I do, but alas, the sight of a garden untended is simply crushing to my soul. And besides, there wouldn’t be anyone with better understanding of how to make this place breathe like it presently does.”

A tinge of intimidating fire flashed across Linden’s face.

“Heed Dani’s words indeed – do not mess with my shrubs.”

Miste, Zeriah and Ejrica gave each other awkward looks. The trio eventually turned to Linden with a unified nod. A warm smile settled to beam on the man's face.

"I'm glad we understand each other, you certainly are a sharp bunch. I wish each of you the best of luck in the trial!"

Just then, someone walked past the group from the direction of the building. The person was hidden underneath a heavy cloak. Curiously, each of their steps was accompanied by the distinct rattle of metal. The person bumped their shoulder into Dani, almost making the boy fall over, and kept on going nonchalantly.

Dani called after the cloaked person cheerily, though noticeably less cheerily than with Linden.

"Hi there, Gideon. In a hurry?"

The person stopped and turned to face Dani with a lazy step. He removed his hood to reveal the face of a young man, likely in his early twenties. He wore the emblem of Hex Nova on a chain around his neck.

"Work is never-ending; no matter how many beasts I slay, there is always more, so I don't exactly know what I should consider *in a hurry*. Was there something you needed?"

The man named Gideon didn't smile, not really, the twitch on his lip was more akin to a condescending sneer.

Dani kept with his own cheery grinning.

"You're as doom 'n' gloom as ever, I see. Come say hello, I'm sure you want to meet your soon-to-be colleagues."

Gideon laid a quick appraising look on the group of newbies.

“Tch… I care little for people who’re willing to associate with a failed hunter like you, Dani. Get back to me once you’re actually interested in ridding this world of the plague that’s suffocating it…”

Gideon pulled his hood over his head and walked away, with the sound of rasping metal underneath his cloak accompanying his step.

Dani bobbed a lazy shrug.

“Bah… always the same. Don’t worry guys, that’s just how Gideon is, he doesn’t mean any harm to anyone.”

Linden gave a mocking laugh.

“Hah! If by *anyone* you mean *any human*, then you’re right. That child has no respect for the purity of nature.”

The dedicated gardener-Adventurer peered at Dani and Reiram for a brief moment, before giving the trio of newbies a sly look.

“…You three have a great taste in company.”

Linden threw his scissors to rest over his shoulder and turned to leave.

“Well, I should get going as well, there’s much work to be done. I’m sure we’ll bump into each other from time to time. Take care.”

Quite comically, Linden took only a dozen or so paces down the path before he stopped next to another tree and remained staring at it in silence.

* * *

The entrance to Hex Nova’s headquarters stood atop a short staircase. A pair of wooden doors was left invitingly open,

leading into a grand entrance hall. The room was shaped like a dome, with multiple supportive columns arching along the walls to converge at the peak of the ceiling. The entirety of the floor was covered by tiny pieces of mosaic, painting a bright-blue star-shaped flower to brighten the otherwise earthly color scheme. At the center of the blue flower, a circular section of the floor was covered with transparent glass; underneath the window resided an enormous face of a clock with hands resembling a pair of mighty halberds. Aside from the structures of muscular stone, and the enormous timepiece ticking away underneath one's feet, there was not much else to see – only a hefty reception desk at the far end of the hall broke the utter emptiness.

Yet, even within all the empty space, Miste found plenty to be impressed by. The girl kept pirouetting around while admiring the ruggedness of the hall, marveling at the clockwork below, all the while laying subdued glances at all the peculiar people pacing through the hall and towards the various corridors leading deeper into the building.

"Everyone looks so determined and cool. They're all Adventurers, right?"

"Right on the money, Mystic-M. The entrance hall is as far as normies are allowed to go. The rest of the building is all Hex Nova's special facilities."

"Like what?"

"Um… well, y'know, meeting rooms… training halls… a library…"

"A library!! You guys have your own library?!"

"Yeah, I think so. I mean, I've never visited it myself, but–"

“Where?!”

“I think it’s in the eastern wing, third floor–”

“I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

Zeriah caught Miste by the collar and yanked her to stay still like a dog on a chain.

“I believe Dani said we aren’t allowed to go anywhere yet.”

“Right… boo… hoo…”

Miste remained staring at one of the corridors with painful yearning in her eyes.

“So much knowledge… just sitting and waiting… Hex Nova’s very own library… there must be so much awesome stuff collected there…”

“Be patient, Mystic-M! You’ll get to browse the books soon enough.”

Zeriah smirked teasingly.

“I for one am just worried that once Miste gets her mitts on the tomes she’ll never want to leave again.”

“That may be the case… hihihi…”

“Uhm, Miste… you’re drooling, you know?”

Reiram headed for the reception desk at the end of the hall.

“Try to keep your pants on till you’ve cleared the trial, will you. Dani, you keep the country bumpkins and Ejrica entertained while I go report my mission as completed.”

“Sure thing, Rei-Rei. Although it looks like no one’s at the desk at the moment. I wonder where Yvette is…”

“I’m sure she’ll appear soon enough.”

Reiram walked for the counter and remained there waiting in secluded silence, far enough from the rest of the group as to be considered a nonverbal insult.

As Miste’s thirst for knowledge was currently blocked by regulations, she turned her interest towards something else.

“Who’s Yvette?”

“She’s the receptionist here at the Guild. She’s a licensed Adventurer like everyone else, but she doesn’t go out on missions or such, but rather works as an administrator, taking in requests from clients and all that stuff – a paper pusher, if you will.”

“She sounds important.”

“We all depend on her. She’s a nice gal, I think you guys will like her.”

Miste’s gaze fluttered around the emptiness of the grand hall. Her attention was soon caught by a person sitting near the entrance.

A tall and slender man, exceptionally tall even when sitting, with unusually sharp facial features, striking enough to be noticeable even from afar. He sat in tranquil silence, his gaze nailed to the floor in front of him, perfectly still. The man’s fluffy and flowing mane rested as a mighty tuft over his neck like the fur of a beast.

“Do you know who that guy is, Dani?”

“Hmm… can’t say that I do. Never seen him before.”

“Then he might be another applicant like us… We should go say *hi*!”

Before anyone could do any such thing, a gleeful holler echoed through the hall.

“Daaa——aaa——niii!!!”

From one of the corridors connecting to the entrance hall, a woman zoomed towards the group, particularly at Dani.

At a glance, the young lady seemed like any other city folk of Magna Crux, with her short jacket and a pair of capri pants – a rather popular street look. After a more thorough eyeballing however, one could not escape the feeling of something being amiss. From the very top of her head, there were two noticeable tufts sticking out from her hair, like fluffy ears of a squirrel. Furthermore, the lady dragged behind her a large bundle of fur that bounced and wagged along her springy steps. The tail-like accessory curved upwards along her back – or at least one would assume it was an accessory…?

The *squirrel-lady* jumped at Dani and stole the boy inside her embrace, grinding her fist against his head.

“Hehehee! It’s been way too long, shrimp-nut! How have you been?”

Dani had some difficulties answering, having his face buried by the buxom lady’s chest.

“What’s that? Squirrel got your tongue? Aww, are you *that* happy to see me!?”

Miste and Zeriah felt a cold shiver creeping down their spines as they got a look at the gaze-of-murder that suddenly flared in Ejrica’s eyes. The exotic lady rarely allowed feelings of anger to

pulse on her face; it was scary to see her entire being cringing while her words hissed out between her teeth.

“I believe Dani would have easier time responding if you would kindly cease shoving your chest against his face…”

“Hmmm… is that right?”

The squirrel-lady tilted her head while sticking her tongue out teasingly, setting off another surge of bloodlust to sizzle in Ejrica’s eyes.

“Yes, that is very much right…”

Ejrica swallowed the blunt of her hate valiantly.

The squirrel-lady released her grip, leaving Dani to wheeze and cough for air.

“Now, now, that’s enough of huffing and puffing, shrimp-nut. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?”

“Haah… haah… Guys… this is Mix…”

“Hello!”

“…and these are… Misthe… Zheriah… and Ehjricha…”

Miste stepped forth to save Dani from collapsing due to his lack of oxygen.

“Hi, nice to meet you. *Mix*, was it? I’m Miste Gauntlett, this is Zeriah Walz, and–”

“Ejrica Nekaro.”

Miste nearly bit her tongue in half from surprise due to Ejrica’s snap. Ejrica kept shooting a dirty look at the squirrel-lady, who seemed unfazed by the glaring.

“Cool! It’s always fun to see new faces around here. Sorry for assuming, but I don’t see any of you guys with an emblem yet…”

Mix gave the symbol of Hex Nova on her belt a tap.

“…so you must be here for the trial, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Sweet! Welcome aboard!”

The squirrel-lady took a sudden step close to Miste and grabbed her right arm. She brought Miste’s gauntlet to better view, gazing the blue alaxdrite embedded in it.

“Gaah!? What now!?”

“Wow… That is an absolutely fetching piece… you rarely see gems this large… and with such perfect cut too…”

The blue from the alaxdrite reflected as a demented gleam in Mix’s eyes.

“You got yourself a handsome load of coin hanging on your wrist there, Miste. You must be filthy rich!”

“Eh? No, no… that’s not… I didn’t pay for it…”

“Someone gave it to you!? Hmm… perhaps it was that handsome partner of yours?”

Mix sent a sly smirk at Zeriah. The squirrel-lady slipped away from Miste and closer to her new target.

“Zeriah, right? Or should I say *Mr. Walz*… Hehehee… y’know, there’s something quite irresistible about a man with thick pockets… if you catch my drift…”

Mix twirled around Zeriah like a house cat begging for attention, swiping the boy's face with her tail-like accessory as she did.

"Sorry, but I…"

Zeriah's response was cut short as the fur tickling his nose made him sneeze.

Once Zeriah caught Miste's face in his sights, he noticed that her look had adopted the same murderous tint as on Ejrica. Both the girls kept beaming silent wrath at the promiscuous squirrel-lady.

Mix responded to the voiceless hostility by giggling softly at her fellow ladies.

"Baw… no need to get all frowny cos of me. I'm just joking!"

Zeriah noticed tiny sparks of blue energy spiking around Miste's gauntlet. The girl was barely keeping composed, the sound of her teeth grinding together was like a fork dragged along a plate.

Miste dashed at Zeriah, coiled around his arm, and dragged him away from Mix.

"M–Miste?"

"I just… I feel safer if you stay close to me, Zeri…"

The crafty grin on Mix's lips told that she was quite enjoying riling up the girls.

"Hehehee… silly me for imagining anything less… You two are absolutely adorable together."

Mix winked at the couple, in a way that was likely aimed more at Miste than Zeriah. Zeriah felt Miste relaxing her grip slightly.

The squirrel-lady caught her tail-like accessory and gave it a firm hug while swooning in place.

“Remember to take good care of him, Miste. A handsome catch like that doesn’t come by often, y’know.”

“I’m aware, thanks…”

As Mix released her tail, the bundle of fur bounced back to point upwards all fluffy-like. The two ear-like tufts on top of her head gave a gentle twitch as the lady sent a genuine smile to the couple.

Something about Mix’s tail-esque and ear-like elements seemed to be strangely authentic.

“Um… Mix?”

“Yeah?”

“Your tail… is that real?”

“Why, of course it is, silly. Here, wanna feel it?”

Mix brought her fluffy behind closer to Zeriah and Miste.

“No, that’s okay…”

“Come on, touch it! I know you wanna!”

The squirrel-lady’s tail wiggled in front of the two with anticipating zeal.

“Don’t be shy…”

Zeriah and Miste gave the tail a soft pet each.

“See? I ain’t fooling you!”

“But… how?”

“…Or why?”

“Hehehee… well, a girl can have her secrets, right?”

Mix twirled around and caught Miste and Zeriah by hand.

“I’m glad we’re friends!”

The squirrel-lady leaned in to whisper to Miste.

“Say… Zeriah wouldn’t happen to have a handsome, and handsomely rich, brother or such, now would he?”

“Nope.”

Zeriah was close to burst out laughing from Miste’s snappy response. A little white lie was acceptable at the time. Friends or not, Miste clearly didn’t seem too keen on the idea of her and Mix ending up as sisters-in-law through Zeriah and Kai.

“Hmm… bummer. Oh well, like I said, catches like that don’t come by often.”

Mix turned her attention towards Ejrica, who was still seething with silent fury.

“What’s with the pouty frown?”

Mix strutted up to the exotic lady while meeting her glare with a warm grin.

“Come, come, we’re soon to be colleagues, right? There shouldn’t be any bad blood between guild-members, right?”

“What exactly is your relation to Dani?”

Ejrica threw her query with iron in her voice.

“Between me and Dani? Hmm…”

An absolutely devilish grin rose to Mix’s lips. The squirrel-lady rushed at Dani, who had just managed to pull himself together after her last assault.

“Please… no more…”

Mix crushed Dani with a hug, and coiled her tail tightly around the boy.

“Dani and I… we are… *lovers*!”

A hollow thump resounded from deep within Ejrica, like someone had set off a stick of dynamite beneath her chest. Her eyes sharpened, melding together with the tattoos around them, forming two deadly sabers across her face. The exotic lady shifted her foot along the floor in preparation to dash – whether at the alleged couple, or to escape, that was uncertain.

Mix burst into howling laughter.

“Hahaha… You… hahaha… you should see the look on your face… hahaha…”

The squirrel-lady released her grip on Dani and the boy went slumping down on the floor. One would feel bad for Dani, were they not busy feeling sorry for poor Ejrica taken over by confusion.

“Relax! Haha… I know Dani’s sister, Marlene. We had our trials together. There’s nothing between me and the shrimp-nut, so stop worrying, okay?”

Mix helped Dani to stand, all the while beaming a cool smirk at Ejrica.

“So, shrimp-nut, how’s Marlene these days?”

“Uh… still the same as ever, y’know… with the legs an’ all…”

“But her condition is still stable, right?”

“Uh-huh, no worries.”

“Beyond excellent!”

Mix gave Dani an encouraging pat on the shoulder while smiling with warmth. An ever-cool smirk slipped in between her smiling and got thrown Ejrica's way.

Watching the exchange from the sidelines, Zeriah and Miste couldn't help but feel bad for Ejrica. Mix was doing everything in her power to piss Ejrica off.

"So, desert princess, what's your story?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you like Dani's girlfriend or something?"

"I am! Well, I mean… I *am* his friend, and I certainly *am* a girl, but–"

"Yeah, okay, you can stop right there. I think I get the picture."

Mix walked up to Ejrica and dropped one of her patented crafty smirks on the exotic lady.

"Word of advice; try smiling a bit more."

"What?!"

"You will catch a lot more bees with honey than with vinegar, y'know."

"What are you saying…"

"Between us girls – guys tend to respond much more strongly to gals who know how to smile."

Mix's hands crept towards Ejrica's cheeks.

"Now, let's turn that frown upside down!"

Ejrica swatted Mix's hands aside. The irritation in Ejrica's voice bubbled dangerously close to boiling over.

“I would much prefer if you’d refrain from touching me!”

“You know what you look like right now? Tell ya what, I’ll show you what you look like!”

As unbelievable as it was, Mix did just that.

In a flash shorter than an eyeblink, a wave of colors splashed across Mix’s body, starting from the tip of her toes and washing up to the top of her squirrel-ears. As the swirl of rainbow-colors settled, Mix had disappeared, and in her place stood Ejrica, or rather a perfect copy of her.

Amidst the sudden gasps in disbelief, none were more startled than Ejrica; the woman in front of her was truly like a mirror image. Before the gasping could turn into any coherent comments, Mix, now disguised as a copy of Ejrica, spoke out.

“See?! You’re being all frowny and scary. It’s a shame, because you’re a true beauty. You should let that face of yours look its nicest.”

Zeriah felt a heavy nudge beneath his chest, as the ability Mix had showcased reminded him eerily of the group’s encounter with Miranda and Viekas a while back. Though unlike then, it was immediately apparent that Mix’s ability wasn’t mere illusion or hypnosis, the effect was too lifelike, and even her voice matched Ejrica’s delivery beat by beat. Suddenly, the squirrel-lady’s tail and ears made a whole lot of sense.

Mix held the ability to shapeshift.

Ejrica’s words snapped and crackled like twigs in a bonfire.

“Stop this farce right now!”

“Come on now, can’t you take a joke…”

“Enough!!”

Ejrica’s right leg exploded from the floor and towards the fake image of her. The kick was intercepted by Mix’s arm snapping in the way. At the same instant, the splash of colors washed away the masquerade to reveal Mix’s true form, tail and ears and all.

An upset wince formed across Ejrica’s face, met by Mix’s confident smirk.

“Sorry to disappoint you, desert princess, but I’m stronger than I look.”

Ejrica retracted her leg and dropped into a firm stance. She was about to say something when Miste suddenly reached out to her with a yelp.

“Ejrica!”

The exotic lady and the girl locked gazes. For a brief moment, a wordless conversation was held between their looks, with a meaning only the two could interpret.

Ejrica softened her expression and turned to Mix with a quick nodding bow.

“I apologize, that was uncalled of me.”

Mix seemed suddenly baffled. She gave her arm a quick shake to ease the numbness – after all, she did just take the full blunt of Ejrica’s kick.

“It’s alright. Yeeouuch… You got a hefty load of gunpowder in those legs, y’know.”

“I have been called a badass in the past.”

A short yet genuine laugh broke from Mix’s lips.

“Heh, well, whoever said that wasn’t exaggerating. You an Astral Bearer too?”

“Indeed I am, though I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that kick was all *me*.”

“Nice. You are one tough cookie.”

Suddenly, a tiny bundle of fur with eyes like jet-black buttons climbed out from within Mix’s jacket. The squirrel-like creature settled to stand on Mix’s shoulder, its voice chirpy and full of snark.

“You should really learn to choose your battles, Mix. The desert princess would’ve royally whooped your ass, y’know.”

Mix gave her arm an embarrassed rub.

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

She turned to address everyone along her squirrel-like partner.

“This here is *Roto*, he’s my partner astra.”

“Hi, glad to meetcha all!”

Ejrica coughed out a dry chuckle.

“I see there’s a certain *theme* going on between you two.”

“Oh, you noticed? Well ain’t you a sharp one.”

The air between Ejrica and Mix was filled with lukewarm glaring.

Sakuya appeared from behind Ejrica to droop over her shoulder.

“I say you should have just gone all-out and sent that bitch flying against the wall!”

“S–Sakuya!!”

Even with Sakuya’s harsh words, Mix broke into heartfelt giggling.

“Oh man… I guess I was truly outmatched right from the start… nicely played… hehehee!”

Roto laid down on Mix’s shoulder to mimic Sakuya.

“You are one funny looking astra, lil missy.”

“You are one to talk, rodent.”

“Your Bearer seems like a sturdy lady.”

“And your partner seems like she knows how to have fun.”

“I know… all day long… it’s all about money, jewels ’n’ gold… and checking out loaded lads… bonus points if they are cute… and stuff… it’s a tough life.”

“Oh yeah? With me it’s a constant string of *Blah, blah, I can’t have any fun, so what if I have friends, all I concern myself with is building my muscles*… and stuff… it’s soooo booooring.”

A unified sigh resounded from the two astra.

“Sounds nice…”

Ejrica gave Sakuya a dirty look.

“What are you doing?”

“Making a friend.”

“I would really appreciate if you wouldn’t.”

Sakuya threw her arm to point at Ejrica while grinning jokily.

“See!? This is what I deal with every day! Run Roto! Run and be free!”

“You heard the lil missy, I think it’s time for us to get going, Mix.”

Contrary to the lukewarm air between their Bearers, Sakuya and Roto immediately found a common note.

Mix twirled around while giving the entire hall a big wave in goodbye.

“I really should make my leave. Adventurer’s life is hard work; money doesn’t make itself!”

She threw a winking grin at Dani…

“It was really nice to see you in one piece, shrimp-nut.”

…And laid a softer smile on Zeriah and Miste.

“Good luck in the trial, I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other around.”

Surprisingly, Mix turned to peer at the far end of the hall, where Reiram was still standing alone by the empty reception desk.

“Hey! Reiram! I’ll be leaving now! Next time if you want to come and say hello, don’t be shy to do so!”

The elder Adventurer responded to the squirrel-lady with a deadpan glare.

Mix took off with a bouncy strut, her fluffy tail waving one last goodbye in her wake. As she passed by Ejrica, she whispered something to the exotic lady, so discreetly that it was impossible for anyone else to make out.

Just as Mix was about to walk through the front door, Dani called out to her.

“Before you go, Mix, would you mind returning my wallet?”

“Ah! Hehe… you noticed?”

Mix brought out a tiny pouch from within her jacket and chucked it at Dani. The boy caught the pouch with an iron grip.

“It was more like an educated guess, really. You pull that same stunt every time.”

“Yup, that I do, hehe! Well, I’m off now!”

“…And the other one.”

“!!”

With a disappointed sigh, Mix brought out another heftier pouch and threw it at Dani.

“Aren’t we being all perceptive today! I guess I still need to hone my act a bit more… Thanks, shrimp-nut, this was great practice. See ya!”

Adding a bit of rush to her strut, the peculiar lady Adventurer exited the building. Roto kept waving goodbye to the group while riding on the shoulder of his Bearer.

Dani handed the thicker wallet to Zeriah.

“I believe this belongs to you, Big-Z.”

“What the…? When did she…?”

“Yeah, Mix is a handful alright, you guys better watch your pockets around her.”

Miste walked up to Ejrica.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Miste. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I came close to losing myself for a moment.”

“What did Mix say to you before going?”

“Ah, it was nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay…? If you say so…”

Dani tried inching closer to Ejrica.

“Don’t let Mix get to you, she just likes to cause a bit of chaos…”

The fierce scowl that Ejrica shot towards Dani told him to keep his distance and not talk to her right now. As Dani’s spirit, and face, drooped towards the floor, Zeriah gave him a comforting pat on the back.

Honestly, I can’t blame Ejrica, I think I know exactly how she’s feeling. Though I never imagined her to be the jealous type. Guess a master martial artist is just a human too…

A voice echoed from a corridor right beside the empty reception desk. Whoever was rushing towards the grand hall was seriously out of breath, it sounded like they were ready to collapse at any moment.

Eventually, the person wobbling out of the corridor while leaning against the wall was revealed to be a young lady, wearing a grand orange bell-dress and a pointy hat that was just as grand.

“Sorry… I’m late… sorry… sorry…”

As the lady stopped to catch her breath, the pair of glasses hanging on the tip of her nose slipped off. She caught her specks, but in exchange managed to drop the hefty stack of papers she was carrying. The documents went thumping on the floor and scattered everywhere.

“Aah! No, no, no——oouh… *sniffle* why now…”

Reiram arrived to help the lady gather her papers.

“Th–Thank you, Reiram… I’m such a klutz…”

“There, there, Yvette, no need for waterworks.”

“R–Right.”

The two were done in no time. The lady in orange dress placed the papers on the reception desk and leaned against the station to catch her breath once more.

“Haah… so much to do… I’m sorry you had to wait, Reiram…”

The elder Adventurer responded to the lady with a vaguely comforting mutter. He waved for the rest of the group to join him at the counter.

By looks alone, Yvette, the designated receptionist at Hex Nova, was an inviting personality. Her plump and freckled cheeks gained an adorable pair of dimples as she greeted the arriving group with a smile. With her orange dress adding a grand volume to her shapes, the lady held the appearance of a pumpkin – a cute pumpkin, mind you.

“Welcome, welcome! Hello Dani. I trust your mission was a success?”

“Yes, another happy customer made even happier by a job well done!”

Miste and Zeriah gave each other a sly look. Dani’s last client, Damien Marenque, the Mayor of Llyra, was a man who couldn’t exactly be called *happy* in any sense of the word.

“That’s great, Dani! Are you here for another job? There are plenty of new requests that I think would be right up your alley.”

“Nah, just reporting back. I’m planning on chilling for a while, y’know, and focus on cheering the fresh batch of Adventurers through their trial.”

“Aww, how nice of you! Just let me know the moment you feel like taking another mission.”

“Sure thing, Yvette!”

With so many people gathered around her desk, the lady receptionist had hard time deciding which way to look. She spent a moment giving everyone subdued nods and shy smiles.

Eventually, Yvette’s gaze settled on Reiram.

“I guess I shouldn’t hold worry for you either, Reiram?”

“My mission was a success as well, yes.”

“Thank goodness! To tell you the truth, I was a bit nervous. That hoodlum you went chasing up north sounded like a dangerous one. But I guess nothing is too challenging for you.”

“I haven’t contacted the request giver yet – could you pass on the message that the deed has been done?”

“Of course, just leave it to me.”

Dani jumped to sit on the edge of Yvette’s desk.

“I was meaning to ask about that, who was it that requested for you to chase that hooded guy anyway? Who would want to stick their paws into business usually handled by the Knights?”

Yvette pulled out a lengthy filing cabinet from under her desk and browsed through the folders within.

“Let’s see. I believe it was…”

“Yvette! I believe my client wanted to remain anonymous.”

“Ah! R–Right, I’m sorry, Reiram. And I’m sorry, Dani, but I can’t disclose that information.”

“Hmm? Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

Yvette spent a moment organizing her workstation. Afterwards, she took a notepad and walked at the front of the desk.

“Now then, if I’m not entirely off the mark, you three have come to attend the Adventurer trial, right?”

Miste was the first of the newbies to bounce forth with an introduction.

“You can bet that cute dress of yours we have! I’m Miste Gauntlett, it’s a real honor to be here!”

“Cute? This old thing…? I mean… it is a real honor to have you here… or rather… uh… I don’t mean to assume… You seem like an honorable person… no… wait… I… uh… what I’m trying to say is welcome, Miss Gauntlett.”

“Let’s drop the *Miss* right away. Plain *Miste* is enough.”

“Of course, if you so wish. I’m *Yvette Cember*, but everyone at the Guild just calls me Yvette. You can do that as well.”

“Awesome, I’ll do that, Yvette!”

Miste’s enthusiasm flared on her face unabashedly as ever. A part of her energy got caught on Yvette as well, the lady’s cheeks flashed with gleeful red as she curtsied at Miste.

“Oh… ah… and… the rest of you are also free to call me just Yvette, if you’d like.”

Zeriah peppered his introduction with a nonchalant nod.

“I’m Zeriah Walz. It’s a pleasure, Yvette.”

Keeping with her usual courteous demeanor, Ejrica bowed deep at the receptionist.

“Thank you for giving us the opportunity to prove ourselves. I hope we come to meet your guild’s expectations. I’m Ejrica Nekaro.”

“My, you’re making me sound so important. Please don’t mind me all that much, I’m just here to humbly assist you all. Anyway, welcome one and all.”

Yvette looked at the enormous clock embedded to the floor of the grand hall. It was close to midday.

“We should get started soon…”

She scanned through the mostly empty hall. A nudge of disappointment tugged at her lips.

“Hmm… another dry year…”

The silent man with the mane of a beast who was still loitering near the entrance caught Yvette’s attention.

“Oh, excuse me, sir? Are you here to attend the trial?”

The man got on his feet and walked for the reception desk. He spoke only after he’d reached the group gathered around the desk.

“Yes, little one, I have come here to prove my strength.”

Only when looking at him up close did the man’s sheer towering height come truly apparent. He was almost a head taller than Reiram. Coupled with his thick mane and unusual golden eyes, his presence came together as less human and more like… something else.

He flashed a wide yet thin grin.

“You may call me *Namek*.”

Yvette fixed her glasses up her nose as she peered up at the towering man.

“Do you have a family name?”

There was a noticeable pause before Namek’s answer.

“…*Lucani*.”

The subtle growl in Namek’s voice gave Zeriah the strangest sensation of nostalgia. The man’s resemblance to a beast was uncanny; he was like an aurora wolf.

Furthering this allegory’s fittingness, Namek began feeling the air around him with rapid whiffs. His nose led him a step closer to Reiram. The elder Adventurer fixed his posture and threw a hostile glare at Namek as he kept tasting the air around him.

“Can I help you with something?”

“…You have the scent of a thousand battles hovering over you.”

“Tch, that few, huh?”

Namek retracted his nose, smiling at Reiram with a thin flash of teeth.

“You must be strong…”

A low rumble, the snarl of a hungry canine, resounded from within Namek as his grin intensified.

“…but all in due time.”

Namek turned around abruptly to address Yvette. The poor receptionist was near to fall over from surprise.

“So, little one, we were about to start the trial, weren’t we?”

“Ah! Y–Yes, that’s right. I don’t believe more people will be showing up…”

“Now, don’t go starting the party without us, Yvette!!”

The voice cutting Yvette short came from the entrance.

A duo of people marched through the grand hall with synchronized step. The taller of the two, a man in his mid-twenties, waved at the group gathered at the reception desk.

“Apologies for the hold up, but the best things in life are worth a bit of waiting, ain’t they?”

The sharp smirk decorating the man’s face told he wasn’t really looking for an answer. His smile was the only thing in his appearance that could be called *sharp*; his simple jacket and trousers were worn, his hair was a mess, and for some unfathomable reason he had decided to forego wearing a shirt underneath his jacket. Admittedly though, he had a body worth showing off. In place of his missing shirt, the man had added a peculiar touch to his attire; he carried a long iron chain bundled around his right arm and coiled across his chest. The emblem of Hex Nova was attached to hang from his wrist.

The person sharing the man’s stride was a woman about equal to his age. Contrary to her companion, her expression was determined and serious. Further mismatching the pair was the woman’s outfit; a long jacket of silvery hue and a jet-black shirt with a matching cravat. Combined with her silky dusk-colored hair neatly tied on the right side of her head, her appearance was all around more elegant of the two.

The man with a sharp grin walked right up to Yvette, while his lady companion stayed further back.

“How the hell have you been, Yvette? All good?”

“I… I’m fine. Thank you for asking, Fatal. I haven’t seen you in some time, I was beginning to think that something had happened?”

“Oh, nothing to worry your pretty little head over. Things got a little dicey after the last gig, so I’ve been laying low for a while. Y’know, dodging the red-coated pricks.”

“I see… well, it’s good to see you back with us.”

“Hahaa, it is indeed spectacular to be back!”

The permanent self-satisfied smirk on Fatal’s face deepened ever still.

“I knew you’d miss me, Yvette. And since I’m such a nice guy, I brought a special treat with me today.”

“What do you mean?”

Fatal waved for his lady companion to come closer.

“Vivian here is something else entirely. Whatever you may throw at her in the trial, she’ll crush it!”

The woman in silvery jacket nodded subtly.

“I’m *Vivian Solclipse*. I’ve come to attend the Adventurer trial.”

“Welcome, Miss Solclipse… Ah, or would you prefer Vivian?”

“Tsk, call me whatever you will.”

“I… I see…”

Yvette dropped her gaze to the floor in a fit of flusterment. She adjusted her glasses while turning to lead the way towards a corridor behind the reception desk.

“If all the applicants could just follow me this way please…”

“Reiram! You old bootlicker! What is happening with you these days!”

Fatal took a pronounced step towards Reiram, gathering the limelight of the room in the process.

“Still the same lapdog of the law as I remember? Oh, but of course you are, old habits die hard, am I right?”

“And I see that you are the same hedonistic punk as always.”

“Hahaah, look out – this dog bites!”

Reiram’s expression did not waver from his usual deadpan state, no matter how much Fatal kept dropping his smug smirk on him.

“How about we continue from where we left off last time…?”

“You mean with my boot stamped on your face? No thanks, I’ve had my fill of your company to last me several lifetimes.”

“Funny you should phrase it like that, you know all about *several lifetimes*, after all. It’s a shame we can’t all walk this planet just as free and self-righteous as you, Reiram.”

Fatal kept pushing closer to Reiram, though making sure not to touch him. He extended his arms wide, like inviting the elder Adventurer to take a shot at him.

“I ain’t the same as you remember. Try me! Come on, don’t be shy… One for old times’ sake!”

“Not interested.”

“So, you have softened after all… what a bummer.”

Nervous anticipation filled the air as everyone watched the two colleagues holding their hostile banter.

Feeling the sting of a dozen eyes at the back of his neck, Fatal pulled away from Reiram and threw his cruel smirk to embrace the rest of the group.

“But would you look at my manners, lost and forgotten like a tear dropping into a puddle. The name’s *Fatal Ironstroke*. Haven’t seen you guys here before, so you must all be newbies. I guess I’ll be a senior to you – that is of course *if* you pass the trial.”

Fatal thumped his right fist against his left palm, making the chains around his arm crackle and jingle.

“Word of advice; if you don’t want to end up as lame and shitty as this grandpa next to me, try to stay clear of him. And better yet, should you ever have the chance to get in my way, stay the hell away. Sound good? Great! I feel like all of us are really connecting already!”

Zeriah dropped his hand over Miste’s shoulder to stop her from moving. She turned to gaze at Zeriah in surprise. Zeriah knew Miste better than anyone, he knew that she would have a mountain of things to say. A calming look between the two settled their opinion as unified; running their mouths against Fatal would accomplish nothing, he wasn’t worth the trouble.

A brief silence fell as everyone else seemed to share the couple’s sentiment.

Fatal turned for Vivian and caught her softly behind the neck.

“Kick some ass out there, Viv.”

Vivian’s lips twitched into a soft smile.

“Huh? No last minute tips or tricks from the senior?”

“How’s this for a trick…”

Fatal brought Vivian close for a kiss. The two kept their moment brief, with Vivian giving Fatal a soft brush on the cheek as they pulled apart. Fatal’s smirk softened into an earnest smile.

“We’ll do the rest later… Don’t keep me waiting too long!”

“Have I ever?”

Their smiles resonated with a rippling laugh.

“I’ll leave Vivian in your care, Yvette. You girls play nice.”

“I… uh… yes, leave it to me.”

Fatal left with a lazy handwave, and was soon gone.

Yvette gathered everyone’s attention with a peppy clap of hands.

“Now then, I believe everyone who will appear has appeared, so we should be ready to roll!”

The receptionist curtsied with an energetic pirouette. She gave the angle of her glasses a quick fix while beaming a gentle smile to everyone.

“On behalf of Hex Nova, the Guild of Adventurers, I, Yvette Cember, welcome each of you to this year’s Adventurer trial! Thank you all for grasping the courage to attend. I wholeheartedly believe in each of your abilities to emerge victorious. Miste Gauntlett, Zeriah Walz, Ejrica Nekaro, Namek Lucani, Vivian Solclipse. Let’s make you all into Adventurers!!”